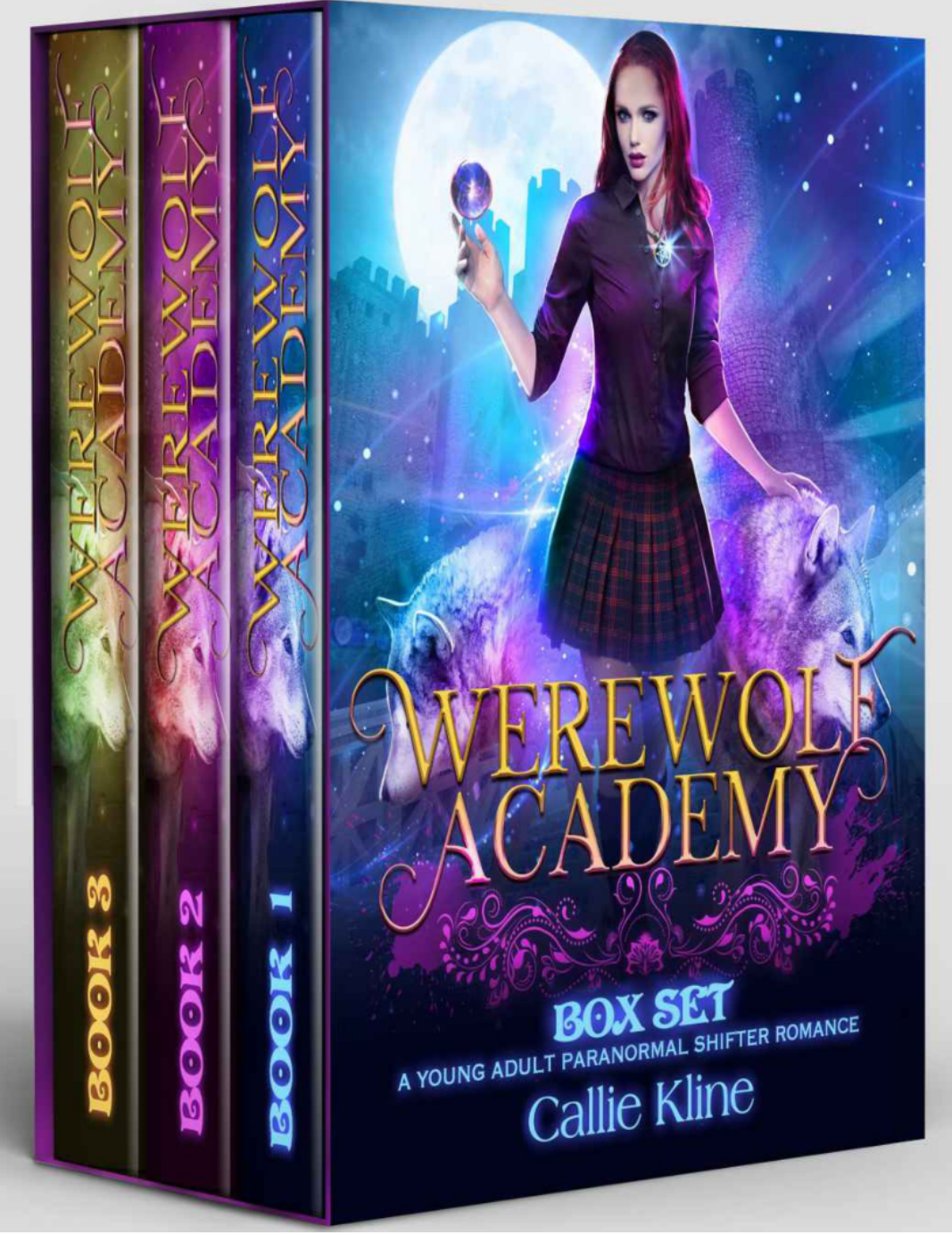
WEREWOLF ACADEMY
BOOK 3
WEREWOLF ACADEMY
BOOK 2
WEREWOLF ACADEMY
BOOK 1
WEREWOLF ACADEMY
BOX SET
A YOUNG ADULT PARANORMAL SHIFTER ROMANCE
Callie Kline

Werewolf Academy
Book 1-3

A Young Adult Paranormal Shifter Romance

Callie Kline

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BOOK 1

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Chapter One

Today wasn't anything special. It was the same damn thing I had to relive over and over again. If only they knew what I hid inside… There was no way that anyone could ever know though.

I pushed my wolf harder, letting her take control. Times like these were my bliss, but it was rare that I could sneak away to run by myself. Birds chirped above in the trees, and even though it was the end of spring, the grass smelled like rain. These small stolen moments were the only thing that kept my sanity.

Hey, Rave, where are you? Greg's raspy voice appeared in my head.

Great, that lasted all of five minutes. My wolf growled as I pushed her back, letting my human side maintain more control. *Sorry, babe. I thought I heard something and wanted to check it out.*

And you didn't wait for me? A few leaves crumbled under his footsteps as he ran in my direction. *You should know better than to shift this close to school and put yourself in harm's way. Besides, that's my job.*

Sometimes I'd bend the rules when there was a chance I could run wild all on my own. When I could let her out and just be what my wolf wanted us to be. *You're right, but none of the humans saw me change. I made sure of it.*

Oh, come on. Greg appeared as he stepped through the trees with both his and my backpacks slung over his shoulder. He dropped my dark pink bag on the ground and pulled out my track uniform. *Put this on. We're both going to be late for practice.*

I hated being told what to do. That was just one more reason why I didn't belong here; not that it mattered. My wolf snapped at me as I willed her back in. It worried me because each year, she seemed to be getting stronger.

Mustering all my control, I forced my wolf to stand down, and I shifted back to two legs. It didn't take long for it to happen, and of course, I found myself buck naked in front of Greg.

A huge grin filled his boyish face, and he dropped his black bag as he took a few steps toward me. "Damn, you're fine." He wrapped his arms around my waist, resting the palms of his hands on my ass cheeks.

"Greg, stop." I should've known better than to shift in front of him. I purposely avoided situations like these because he'd get pushy. "Someone might see us."

"Oh, come on." His dark brown eyes found mine, and he grabbed my ass. "You know that it's been forever since you've given me any, and it's way past time." His lips landed on mine, and he forced his

tongue into my mouth.

How I wished I could think this was romantic, but no… it felt like a slug dancing inside my mouth. It was juicy, limp, and somehow cold. I placed my hands on his chest and pushed him backward. “Though that may be true, now isn’t the time or the place. Remember we’re going to be late to practice.” I grabbed my clothes that had fallen on the ground and quickly dressed before he decided to try again.

“If it wasn’t for the big game, I’d be taking you right now.” He sighed as he ran his fingers through his short, brown hair. “Come on, we can’t be late.” He grabbed our bags and then reached for my hand, rushing back through the few trees that had hidden us from the outside, human world.

Ever the obedient girlfriend, I followed behind my alpha, obeying his every command. It made me sick, and my wolf howled loudly in my ears. But this was my role. Women weren’t alphas; betas at most, and even that was rare.

As we stepped out into the student parking lot, a group from our pack was standing there, directly facing us. We normally tried not to stand out, but it was hard, especially when we were in a group.

What the hell are you doing? Greg linked the others in, rage evident in his eyes.

Shit, I’d messed up this time.

Darren cringed and glanced down at the asphalt. He ran his hand through his shaggy, black hair and kicked his red baseball cleats on the ground. *Sorry, man. You took off, and we thought there might be a problem.*

What did you expect? Ian lifted his chin as his light green eyes glared at me. *Figured princess was causing trouble.*

That one had never liked me, and I couldn’t blame him. One day, he cornered me at school and told me that I wasn’t worthy of Greg. That may have been true, but I thought it was more likely that Ian was the only one who could sense my wolf inside and worried my ranking could be higher than his. He was Greg’s beta, and it was easy to tell just by looking at him. He was built like a freaking Ford truck and one of the best football and baseball players that Montgomery Central High School had ever seen.

“Oh, don’t give Raven a hard time.” Sheila tossed her dirty blonde hair over her shoulder and stuck out her boobs that had Indians written across them.

Ugh, I’d always hated the mascot; Indians. I guess that’s what you got for living on the outskirts of Clarksville, Tennessee and attending the infamous school that was built on some man-made lake.

“Come on, let’s go before the coach throws a fit.” Greg ignored

Sheila's advances and wrapped an arm around my shoulders. "Dad told me that there might be a scout coming from Bloodshed Academy tonight for the big game. It's the last big one before graduation."

My blood felt as though it turned ice cold, and my wolf perked up at the name. Bloodshed Academy was the elite paranormal school where only the best alphas attended and even fewer graduated. If you weren't there by invitation, wards prevented you from entering—that was just how damn exclusive it was.

"Are you fucking with me?" Ian stopped moving, and his mouth dropped open.

"They're coming here?" Darren's voice cracked, and he smiled like a kid on Christmas morning.

"Hell, yeah!" Greg glanced at my face and moved his hand down my waist possessively. "They called my dad last night and said they were coming to scope me out. What do you think of that, baby?"

Honestly, it bothered me that everything got handed to these four entitled asses. "That's … great." I tried to put enthusiasm into my words, but they only fell flat.

"Don't sound so happy for him." Sheila faked a frown while shaking her head. "It's not like it's a big deal or anything."

She was as dumb as a box of bricks, so I must have fumbled worse than I had thought. "No, I am." Even then, my words fell flat. I had to recover and fast. "Sorry, I just have my final exam in Calculus. I'm stressed." I stopped walking and grabbed Greg's arm. As he turned around toward me, I stood on my tiptoes and kissed his lips. "I'm really happy for you."

A wide smile spread across his face, and he bent down for a longer kiss. "You should be happy for us. There's no telling where this will take me."

That was the problem. It was always about where he was going, and my future never seemed to matter. "I can't wait." Somehow, I managed to force those words out and believably too.

"Come on, man." Ian wrinkled his nose and punched Greg in the shoulder. "We're going to be late."

"Yeah, you're right." Greg leaned in and kissed my forehead. "See you at the game, alright?"

"Of course." Ever the doting girlfriend, I had to be there.

The three of them walked off laughing while Sheila, my frenemy, stayed right next to me.

"Do you even care for him?" Sheila narrowed her ice-blue eyes at me.

The truth was that I did care for him. Well I mean, I didn't want him to get bitten by a vampire or anything. So that had to count for something. "Of course, I do. School is just wearing me out."

“I told you that you were crazy for taking on that load.” She arched an eyebrow and lifted both hands in the air. “I mean, why do that to yourself? You should have taken it easy. It’s not like you’re going off to college or anything.”

Of all things, she had to bring up that sore topic. “I mean if Greg goes to Bloodshed …”

“Do you really think you could get in?” Sheila laughed so hard she bent over holding her stomach.

My wolf growled in my head. “No, I thought maybe I’d be able to go to a college too.”

“Oh, come on, Raven.” Sheila rolled her eyes and began heading toward the track. “We don’t go off to college. Bloodshed is the only exception. You’ll be heading to community college just like me.”

Pressure began to build in my chest, and it almost felt like I might explode. “But if Greg says …”

“So glad the two of you could show up.” Mrs. Smith scowled at the two of us. “It’s not like you’re five minutes late or anything.”

“Sorry, coach.” I had to think of something to get us out of trouble.

“Yeah, sorry. Raven couldn’t find her shoes so we had to search for Greg to check in his truck.” Sheila side-eyed me and sighed. “And of course, that’s where they were.”

It only seemed fair for her to blame me since my seconds of stolen freedom got us in this predicament. “I was studying on the way to school this morning and must have forgotten to put them in my bag.”

“Well, don’t let it happen again.” Mrs. Smith waved her hand to the left and pointed in the direction of the other runners. “Go catch up to them and warm up. We’ll be doing sprints soon.”

I took off in a run with Sheila right behind me.

AS I ENTERED THE HOUSE, I found both of my parents in the kitchen.

Mom’s dark brown hair was pulled up into a messy bun, and her blue t-shirt had flour dusting the front. “Hey, honey. I’m glad you’re home.” She opened the oven and pulled out some raw steaks.

Dad wrinkled his nose and fanned his hand in front of his face. “You smell disgusting.” Despite his complaining, there was a twinkle in his dark brown eyes.

“I’m sure you wouldn’t smell much better after sprinting a total of five miles.” My legs still felt like jelly when I walked. It didn’t help that my hair was stuck to the back of my neck and my stomach was completely empty. “I’m going to run upstairs and take a quick shower.”

“Hurry, we can’t be late to Greg’s game tonight,” Dad called out after me.

Yes, heaven forbid we be late for something of Greg's. Sometimes I wish my parents weren't as tight with Greg's parents. Both sets were bound and determined that he and I were meant to be together. I'd been dating him since I was sixteen in the middle of my sophomore year. Now, here we were seniors and eighteen.

I remembered the night I turned sixteen. Right before I went out on my first date, which had been with Greg, my mom gave me a crescent moon necklace. She had made me promise to never take it off. It was long enough so that even when I shifted, it still stayed around my neck. I'd never taken it off except for one time—last week. The chain broke when I was changing for school, and I had to find a replacement chain. Mom found me and practically lost her shit. She ran into her room, brought me one of hers, and told me to put it back on immediately.

It only took a few minutes for me to bathe, and I felt like a new human being. As I headed downstairs, there was a knock on the door. Greg's scent hit me before I even reached the door and put me on edge. Why the hell was he here?

Not wasting a moment, I yanked open the door and found him in a clean Indian's baseball uniform. He winked at me and leaned down to kiss me on the cheek. "I see you're wearing the sundress I like."

It almost made me completely regret the decision, but I knew it would be hell from my parents if I didn't make an effort. The sundress was off the shoulders and white with a blue pattern. Greg always said my dark brown hair and olive complexion contrasted nicely with the colors. "Got to do everything I can to support you."

"Greg?" Mom called from the kitchen. "Please come in and join us. We were just sitting down for dinner."

"You had me at dinner," Greg called back before capturing my hand in his.

As we walked into the kitchen, Dad was already laying an additional plate on the table. "We gotta make sure the big baseball legend himself gets fed."

"Especially for tonight's game." Greg marched over to the end cabinet and opened it, grabbing another fork and knife. "I still can't believe it."

"Yeah, time goes by fast." Mom carried over the steaks to the table, placing them right in the center. "If you think it's quick now, just wait until you get our age." She patted Greg's shoulder as she headed back to grab the steamed vegetables.

"No, that's not it." Greg took a deep breath, savoring the aroma. "It's the scout that's coming."

"Scout?" Mom pulled her seat out from the table and sat.

"Your Dad wasn't able to meet me for lunch today so we haven't

heard anything." Dad sat and picked up his fork from the table.

Yay, here he goes again. Let's hear all about the hoity-toity scout. I plopped into my seat and grabbed my glass of water.

"Someone from Bloodshed Academy is coming to meet me." Greg couldn't keep the huge grin from his face. "Can you believe it?"

Dad startled, and his fork pinged off the table while Mom's face turned a shade of white.

"Say what now?" Dad straightened in his seat and cleared his throat.

"Right?" Greg grinned as he cut a large piece of his steak and then took a big bite. "It's amazing."

Although Mom and Dad's faces didn't show looks of amazement. They almost looked scared, and I had no clue why.

Chapter Two

To say dinner was tense would be an understatement. Greg talked the entire time about Bloodshed Academy and what it meant for someone from their pack to finally get an invitation. Mom and Dad only nodded their heads and replied in one or two words, which was starkly different than normal.

As Greg and I walked out into the foyer, Mom and Dad followed behind.

“Honey, I’m not feeling so well.” Mom placed a hand on her stomach and then shot Greg a sympathetic smile. “I’m sorry, but I don’t think I’ll be able to make the game tonight.”

“You had said something earlier about not feeling well.” Dad touched her shoulder and shook his head. “Is it getting worse?”

It’s funny because I don’t remember her saying anything earlier about not feeling well. In all fairness though, I had been rushing to school since I had overslept.

“Yeah, but I hate missing the baseball game.” Mom sighed and gave me a small smile. “It’d be kinda nice if you stayed home to help take care of me.”

Was she being serious? She and Dad had been all about this game up until this very moment. “What?”

“I really need her there with me.” Greg threw his arm around my shoulders and tugged me into his chest. “She’s my good luck charm.”

His musky cologne nearly made me choke. Who the hell wears cologne when they’re going to play a game? He’s the damn pitcher, so he’s one of the sweatiest ones, too. “It’s the last baseball game of my senior year.” I hated being this way because my parents usually didn’t ask me for a lot. But there was something inside me telling me I needed to go.

“Yeah, but you can always hang out with your friends another night.” Dad winked at me and pouted. “Please don’t make me take care of her all by myself. You know how she gets when she’s not feeling well.”

In Dad’s defense, Mom did get overdramatic and diva-ish when she didn’t feel well.

“Sir, I really need her with me.” Greg’s arm stiffened around me, and a low growl rumbled in his chest.

An alpha wolf doesn’t like not being listened to. If Dad wasn’t careful, Greg’s wolf was going to come out.

Dad glanced at my mother and then sighed. “Fine, but come back home right after the game. The scout is here for Greg, so it’d be best if

you didn't interfere."

"Sure, I can have Ian bring her back." Greg dropped his arm from my shoulder and opened the door. "Come on, I can't be late for warm-ups."

Yes, we must rush. The world would come to a halt if Greg wasn't there. Those words were at the tip of my tongue, but I swallowed them down like a bitter pill. I didn't feel like fighting with him tonight.

As I turned to step out the door, Mom grabbed my arm and tugged me toward her so she could look me in the eyes. *Make sure your necklace stays on you, no matter what. Promise me.*

Ever since last week, she'd been nagging me about my necklace. I didn't understand why it was so important to her. *Yes, I promise.*

"Is everything okay?" Greg's brows furrowed, and he glanced at where mom was clutching my arm.

"Yes, fine." Mom released her tight grip and giggled a little too loudly. "I'm just feeling off and hate not being there. I better get to bed." She turned to walk down the hallway.

"Both of you be safe," Dad said as his eyes firmly met mine. "If something feels off, get back here immediately."

Something was definitely going on, and it was freaking me out. "Of course."

Why are your parents being so weird? Greg took my hand and pulled me out the door.

No clue. I mean, it's my senior year, but it's not like I'm leaving the pack or anything. Although he was, and I was so damn jealous. At least, I'd get a little freedom away from him. Sometimes I felt like he was suffocating me and I'd never be able to find air.

"Hey." He stopped at the passenger door and gave me a smile. "You aren't worried about me leaving, are you?"

"No, not really." I gazed down and let my dark hair hide my face. I didn't want him to catch my relieved features.

"This shouldn't change anything between us." He placed his index finger under my chin and lifted my face. "I'll be back during breaks and stuff."

He was going for reassurance, but we both hoped everything would change. "We … um … better go. You'll be late."

Slowly, he turned. "Yeah, you're right." He walked around the front of the truck and got in the cab.

I took a deep breath and opened the passenger door. I stepped onto the ledge and slid onto the seat of the F-150. Of course, it was only a year or two old, which didn't help us blend in with the other students very well. "Why don't we just run there?" I cringed because the words slipped out before my filter kicked in.

“You know why.” He started the truck and frowned at me. “It’s not like we can take our clothes with us in that form. Besides, what if someone saw us stepping out from the woods. The school is going to be packed with people attending the game.”

His condescending attitude really rubbed my wolf the wrong way. It growled and bared its teeth inside me. I struggled with the animal and the expected behavior that a submissive wolf exhibited.

Silence descended inside the truck, and my eyes were glued on the houses that we passed by. Our entire pack lived in the subdivision, which made it easy for meetings and running under a full moon.

It didn’t take long for us to reach the high school. The sun was setting, and the baseball field lights flashed on. There were several students and parents there already, including Ian, Darren, Sheila, and Greg’s dad, Jerry.

“You were making me nervous.” Greg’s dad laughed as he approached us. “I expected you to be here long before now.”

“Sorry, I went to pick up Rave. Her parents insisted I stay and eat.” Greg reached into the bed of the truck and grabbed his baseball bag. “But I’m here now and ready to play.” His eyes glowed ever so slightly, revealing his wolf’s excitement.

“Well, the recruiter should be here any second.” His dad glanced around and frowned, checking his watch. “They said they’d be here by now.”

“Maybe he got stuck in traffic or something.” Greg tucked his red Indian’s baseball shirt into his pants. “Come on, I’ve gotta get warmed up.”

“Alright, I’ll let you know when the scout gets here.” Greg’s dad smacked his back as he walked by. “I’m so proud of you, son.”

I’m sure he was too. It seemed like fate favored some over others. Greg got to fully embrace his wolf and very likely go to the most prestigious Academy for only the strongest supernaturals. My wolf whimpered, and she took a deep breath. We had to hold it together at least until graduation. I was hoping that the stress from senior year was the reason why my wolf was getting so antsy. In a week’s time, it should be all behind me.

“It’s about time you got here, man,” Ian shouted from shortstop as Greg hit the field.

Greg placed his hat on his head and pulled out his glove. “I’m right on time.” He balled his fist and smacked it on the inside of his glove, taking his place on the pitcher’s mound. “Let’s get going.”

Darren saluted Greg from first base. “Whatever you say, boss.” Then, he took a step and threw the ball at Greg.

“I hope you’re as proud of him as we are.” Jerry kept his eyes on his son and took a step closer to me, talking in a near whisper.

I was positive the right answer wasn't that I couldn't care less. "Of course."

"Good." Jerry nodded his head, and his body became a little less tense. "Now don't get me wrong. Susan and I are praying each night that you both choose each other to become mates. But we just want to make sure you aren't going to try to talk him into staying."

It's kind of funny that they thought I had so much influence over Greg. "Don't worry. I won't."

"See, this is why you two make such a good couple." He smiled and bumped his shoulder into mine. "Both of you look out for each other's best interest."

Sure, that's exactly what I'm doing. Granted, I'm happy for him. Although this would give me a chance to figure things out on my own. Greg thought we always had to be going and hanging out with both wolves and humans. It'd be nice to have a break … to breathe.

"Hey, guys." Sheila strolled up with Susan by her side. Both wore identical red shirts with Indians written on them.

"Are they here yet?" Susan walked over and kissed Jerry on the lips.

"No, not yet." Jerry glanced around and shrugged. "I'm sure they'll be here soon though."

"I can't believe my baby might get accepted into their program." Susan smiled so wide that it had to hurt her face.

Maybe one day, I'd be that happy.

"Wanna grab a seat before they get full?" Sheila nodded toward the bleachers.

"Yeah, sure." I'd hoped to find a seat before she got here. Sheila wasn't so bad, but her blatant need for male attention made me rather uncomfortable.

"Sweet!" She headed toward the bleachers, and as she passed by the fence, she smiled. "Hey, boys."

"Hey!" The second baseman grinned back at her. "Looking good.'

"Aw, thanks." She winked at him and then turned so she was marching up the red bleachers.

"You know you can't date humans." That wasn't a rule a long time ago, but now it was law. If a human and a wolf reproduced, it either caused a woman to die during birth or resulted in major deformities.

"Yes, I know, Mrs. Rule Follower." Sheila took a seat and rolled her eyes. "It's just harmless flirting. Unlike some here, I don't have an alpha that's crazy about me."

I wasn't sure if he was crazy about me though. "Still, you don't need to lead them on." I sat next to her and was grateful she chose a section right next to the stairs. At least when I got bored, I had an easy escape.

“So, what do you think will happen with you and Greg when he leaves for Bloodshed?” Sheila glanced at her nails and rubbed her fingers over the newly painted, bright red nail polish.

“I don’t know.” For once, I didn’t have to lie. “I guess time will tell.”

Sheila pursed her lips to the side. “You’re not going to try getting him to stay and lock it in?”

The thought of locking it in made me cringe. “No, it’s what’s best for him. I’ll figure out my own path too.”

“Well, you’re a lot nicer than me.” She shrugged and stared at the ball field. “I’d be begging him to stay.”

Yeah, I was nice. That’s the reason I was so supportive. “What are you going to do after graduation?”

“I’m not sure yet.” Sheila pursed her lips and sighed.

“Well, it’s only a week away.” I don’t know why I was pushing her. “You probably should figure it out.”

“You know what?” She narrowed her eyes at me and frowned. “If I wanted to hang out with my Mom, I would’ve stayed home and not come here. So back off.”

“Sorry, I was just trying to help.” Maybe I overstepped my boundaries.

“Well, I don’t want that kind of help.” She crossed her arms and sighed.

Silence descended between us with only the sound of people taking their seats, some low chatter, and the sounds of all the players taking their positions could be heard. The other team was dressed in royal blue with Dodgers written across their chests.

As the away team began their batting line up, Sheila turned toward me. “If my boyfriend was potentially leaving in the near future, I’d be a wreck. So why aren’t you?”

Most committed wolves can’t stand to be apart for long, and for mates, it’s almost impossible. Obviously, I was acting strange … maybe I could play it off as being submissive. “It’s what he wants.”

Greg stared the batter down and then stepped forward, pitching the ball. The batter swung but was too late. The ball was already in the catcher’s glove.

“Strike one,” The ref said, lifting a finger in the air.

“I’m thirsty.” I needed to get away for a few moments and get my thoughts together. I stood and began my descent down the stairs.

“Cool. Grab me a coke too?” Sheila called after me.

Needing space, I just nodded and kept my focus on getting away. Something sweet tickled my nose as I reached the ground. It smelt like cotton candy, and my mouth began to water. They only have the bagged kind at the concession stand, so it didn’t make sense to smell it

so strongly.

As I made my way to the concession stand, I could hear loud cheers as the ump yelled, “You’re out.”

At least Greg was doing well. There was no line at the concession stand, so I was able to walk right up to the window. “I’d like two cokes and a hotdog.” Maybe a little bit of over-processed meat would help calm my nerves.

The girl turned and got my order when someone stepped behind me. The sweet scent filled my nose again and confirmed it wasn’t from the concession stand. It was from the person standing right behind me. I forced myself not to turn. It had to be a supernatural because it was a natural scent, not from perfume or cologne.

“Here you go.” The girl put the items on the counter, and then her eyes widened at the person behind me. “Oh, hello.”

I grabbed a drink and the hot dog when a pale, smooth hand reached for the second cup.

“It looks like you could use some assistance.” His voice was alluring and smooth.

However, my wolf growled, and it was hard holding back the sound from my throat. I turned around and became somewhat breathless. “I …”

“Thank you is usually what most people say when someone does something nice.” He smiled, making his blue eyes sparkle even though the sun was setting. He arched his eyebrow, which set off his short blond hair.

“Well, I’d hate for you to go through the trouble.” I immediately registered what type of supernatural he was. He was a fucking vampire. “So, I’ll be on my way.”

“No, no.” His smile turned into a smirk, and he took a step closer, infiltrating my space. “I insist. It wouldn’t be very gentlemanly if I didn’t help a damsel in distress.”

“I’m not a damsel in distress.” The guy may be sexy as hell, but that was part of a vampire’s allure. Most stories and movies weren’t accurate about any of the supernaturals, but they nailed it on the vampire. They were meant to be charismatic and charming. The best way to explain the creature was to compare one to a sociopath. They knew right and wrong but usually didn’t give a crap. I grabbed the drink from his hand, causing the liquid to spill over the sides.

He smashed his lips together as if he was trying to hide his smile.

It didn’t work though.

“Do I amuse you?” Yes, my fingers may have been wet from the Coke, but I refused to admit it.

“That’s one way to look at it.” He placed his hand over his mouth. Still, his cheeks were raised, so him trying to hide his laughter didn’t

work. “Let me grab you some napkins.”

“No, I think you’ve done enough.” I leaned back on my heels and took off toward the bleachers. For once, I was hurrying to be with Sheila instead of escaping her.

I didn’t hear any footsteps behind me, but that was the thing with vampires. They were agile and quick. My heart began to race in my chest, but I refused to alarm the others. Still, why was there a vampire here? I wasn’t sure I wanted to know the answer.

Chapter Three

"Are you okay?" Sheila asked as I slid back into my seat behind her.

"Uh … yeah. Why?" I needed to calm down and get my act together.

"Because you're pale as anything, and it's almost as if you've seen a ghost." She reached over and grabbed one of the drinks. "Eww … Did you drink out of both of them?"

"No, I spilled some of yours when I was gathering everything." She didn't give me any money, and now she was complaining. It figured.

"Well, Greg has struck out two batters." She glanced around and frowned. "I'm kind of surprised that the scout isn't here. I hope he gets here before the game is over."

"They aren't recruiting him for his baseball skills." It made no sense that everyone was making such a big deal about a recruiter coming for the game.

"He dominates the field." Sheila rolled her eyes and shook her head. "That alone shows how much of a leader he is."

I bit my tongue. I didn't need to argue with her because, at the end of the day, it was irrelevant. The sweet scent once again filled my nose.

"Hey, are you sure you're okay?" For the first time ever, she really looked at me with concern in her eyes.

"Sorry, I'm just a little off." A prickly sensation crawled down my spine, and I tapped into my wolf's hearing. All I heard were the sounds of a ball hitting a bat, the crowd cheering, and some kids playing tag in the open grassy area. Nothing sounded out of sorts, but I couldn't shake the feeling that I was being watched.

Sheila jumped to her feet and started screaming. "Get him at first!"

My eyes went back to the game and watched as Ian threw the ball to Darren. Darren caught the ball as the runner ran on first.

"Safe!" Yelled the umpire.

"Dammit." Sheila slumped back on the seat. She sighed and glanced over at me. "Look, it's just now settling in. I'm sure you guys will make it work."

If only that was what was bothering me. "Yeah, you're right." For some reason, I didn't want to alert the others. My wolf wanted to be the one to call the shots with this guy.

I glanced over my shoulder, and of course, tall, blond and mysterious was right there. He lifted his hand and wiggled his fingers at me.

Who the hell was this guy? I stood and held his gaze. “I’ve got to run to the bathroom.”

“Why didn’t you go on the way to the concession stand?” Sheila asked, but her eyes were still locked on the baseball field.

Good, it’d be easier to slip away again. “Sorry, I didn’t need to go a few minutes ago.” Without any further explanation, I ran down the steps and behind the bleachers that were near the woods.

Yes, I was being stupid, but reinforcements weren’t far away. That’s how I was justifying it.

“I’m surprised you came out here alone.” He appeared on the other side of the bleachers, heading straight toward me. “Don’t you realize what I am?”

“A leech, right?” As soon as those words left my mouth, I wished I could take them back.

“Oh, wolves have a sense of humor after all?” His face appeared as if it was made of stone. He wasn’t giving anything away.

“Why are you here?” I had to figure out why a vampire would show up now. It made no sense.

He tilted his head and narrowed his eyes. “Didn’t they tell you?”

My heart stopped. Is this why my parents were acting so strange? They knew a vampire would be here. “No, they didn’t.”

“Well, then. For once, I get to make the introduction and share the ever so lovely news.” He chuckled at the end and began to move closer to me.

“I won’t be your dinner if that’s what you’re getting at.” I didn’t back away. I wouldn’t act like prey. Even if he took me down, it would be with me fighting ’til the end.

“You know, when I first laid eyes on you earlier, I thought that somehow she was wrong, but now I’m not so sure.” Now he was only a few feet away from me, and his candy cotton scent picked up in the breeze.

“What are you talking about?” This one time, I let my wolf take control but didn’t allow the shift. A low growl came from my throat, and I lifted my chin defiantly.

“There she is.” A smile filled his face, and his body began to relax. “I’m the recruiter from Bloodshed.”

Wait. If he was the recruiter, why was he standing here with me? “Oh … Well, Greg is playing in the baseball game, but I’m sure he’ll make time for you after.”

“Why would I want to talk to him?” His forehead creased, and he scratched his head.

“I thought you were coming to recruit him.” None of this was making any sense.

“No, I’m here for you.” His words were clear and direct.

“But a girl can’t be an alpha.” Those were the words my parents had told me ever since I was a child. “I’m not eligible to be there.”

“That’s not true at all.” He raised both hands in the air. “Hell, the headmaster is a woman and the toughest person I’ve ever met. She’s the one who told me how to find you.”

“I don’t understand.” I didn’t want to get my hopes up. Maybe someone was playing a trick on me. “Is this a joke?”

“Okay, let’s try this again. A redo if you will.” He held his hand out toward me and smiled. “Hi, I’m Cole, a recruiter for Bloodshed Academy.”

This had to be a dream or a nightmare. At this point, I wasn’t really sure which way this would go. “Hi, I’m Raven.”

“Nice to meet you.” He extended his right hand and reached for mine. “I promise I won’t bite … unless you want me to.”

I wasn’t sure if he was laughing or hitting on me. I reluctantly took his hand and shook it. “I thought you were trying to make a good impression.”

He chuckled as he crossed his arms in front of him. “No. I think it’s you who should be trying to make a good impression.”

“If this is some kind of joke Ian is playing on me, tell him to go jump off a cliff.” That’s the only way this would make any sense.

“Hey, whoa.” He approached me slowly as if I was a rabid animal. “I swear. This is no joke. I don’t know why you’re assuming I’m here for …” He paused and tapped his finger to his lip. “What’s his name again?”

“Greg,” I growled in my throat and then took a steadying breath. I couldn’t let this asshole know just how riled up he was getting me. “You called his father last night to tell him you were coming to meet him.”

“Wolves.” He chuckled and smirked. “People say vampires hear what they want. Every supernatural is guilty of it just like *Greg’s* father.”

“Okay, so what did he misunderstand?” Instead of arguing the fact, I decided to turn logic around on him.

“Well, I did call him ...”

“See.” I interrupted him and cheered in my head.

“You didn’t let me finish.” Cole lifted a hand and waved it in circles. “May I continue?” His eyes filled with mirth.

“Fine.” If he was going to play games, so could I. “You may.”

“But I only said I was coming to meet one of his pack members.” He dropped his hands, and any trace of mirth vanished. “As I said; you’re the one we want.”

My heart picked up, and my stomach felt as if it was performing somersaults. “Me … But why?”

“Do you ever feel like you’re battling something inside of you?” He moved so there was only an inch of space between us. “That you want to become unhinged?”

That’s exactly how I’d been feeling lately. Like if I didn’t contain my inner animal, I would explode and raise havoc. “Yes.” Something inside me felt freer. Like I was stepping away from my denial and accepting a small portion of what I tried to keep hidden.

“We’ve all been there, and that’s what the academy is really about.” The sparkle in his eyes vanished, and he touched my cheek with his fingertips. “You’re stronger than any of us realized. For you to keep your wolf contained must be a constant struggle, and not one many people could handle.”

Unease filtered through me. I’ve tried so hard to keep her contained, and it was disconcerting that he could read me that easily. “How will going there help?”

“Your natural instincts are to be on top of the hierarchy.” He dropped his hand, but his eyes still held me in place. “Bloodshed will encourage you to rank higher and to finally become one with your supernatural side.”

“But I know my wolf.” He acted as if I were clueless about myself. “She’s a part of me.”

“It’s hard to explain, but you’ll see soon enough when you get there.” Cole patted my arm like I was one of his college buddies.

“I didn’t say whether I would go or not.” I didn’t like how he was making my decisions for me.

“If you don’t, your wolf will get stronger, and you won’t be able to contain her.” He closed his eyes and shuddered. “Believe me, I’ve seen it happen once, and it wasn’t pretty.”

“Are you trying to scare me?” This random guy … no wait, vampire, just showed up and invited me to Bloodshed Academy. It was hard to believe. He had to be up to something. Even though I tried to convince myself to be suspicious, my wolf instincts were getting excited.

“I wish that was it.” After a brief pause, he took a step back. “Look, I came here and scouted you out. You’re legit even if you’re out of sync with your wolf. I’ll be back after graduation to pick you up.” He turned so his back was facing me.

“You don’t know my answer, though.” What kind of school just assumed you were going to agree?

He stopped in his tracks and glanced over his shoulder. “You’ve got a lot to learn. When someone gets invited to Bloodshed, there is only one answer.”

“I know most people would kill to get in there. Most jump at the opportunity as soon as it permits.” This arrogant asshole assumed he

knew my answer, which made me ornery as hell. “But I’m leaning toward no.”

A smile slowly grew across his face and then turned into a smirk. “It’s cute that you think you can truly make the decision.”

It was my future to decide even if I chose to stay here and be miserable. “Of course, I do. It is my choice.”

His ice-blue eyes somehow seemed colder. “No one can reject Bloodshed Academy. There are dire consequences if you do.”

“Are you threatening me?” He’s a fucking vampire and on my turf. He had some nerve.

“No, I’m not.” His sweet scent seemed to turn a little sour. That happened when vamps got angry. “But no one rejects the academy and survives. You best learn that now.” He took a step back and scowled. “I’ll see you next week.” And just like that, he disappeared.

I stood there breathing heavily with my wolf taking control. I was about to shift, but I couldn’t do that here and now.

Loud cheers from the crowd rang in my ears, and everything began to blur. If I didn’t get my act together, Cole’s words could come true. My wolf instincts were calling me, and it was hard resisting the pull. I fell to the ground and curled into a ball as the war within me fought for dominance.

Chapter Four

The sun shone into my room, causing me to pull the blankets over my head. Today was the day I graduated, which meant a later start, but dreams had been plaguing me since that night at the baseball field.

It didn't help that Sheila wound up taking me home because Greg was upset that the recruiter never showed. He was arguing with his Dad, thinking he must have blown it for him. If I had added that the recruiter had shown but wanted me, things would've escalated more than it already had.

You'd think I'd have been excited to put high school behind me, but right now, time seemed to be moving too fast. I just needed to get through the day in one piece.

I got up, dressed, and put some makeup on, but my mind seemed to be elsewhere. I was only going through the motions.

A knock on the door startled me. Damn it, a wolf should never be taken by surprise. I was so preoccupied with my thoughts, ignoring the world. A light vanilla scent floated into the room. "Come in."

"Hey, honey." Mom opened the door and entered the room. Her dark brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and her forehead was lined with worry. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, why?" It probably didn't help that I had been jumpy the past few days. Almost as if I thought Cole was going to appear out of thin air.

"Ever since you came home from the baseball game, you've been acting strange." She pursed her lips and tapped her fingers on her black slacks. "Even Greg has said something. I just want to make sure you're okay. Did anything happen?"

I'm surprised that Greg noticed how I'd been acting. He'd been so obsessed and angry about the scout never showing. I didn't want to lie to Mom, but at the same time, I felt like the truth should stay hidden. "It's a little surreal. I mean my whole life changes today."

A tight smile flitted across her face. "Yes, it does. Have you figured out what your next steps are? You haven't talked about it for a little while."

Well, that's because apparently, I'm going to a school that no one can refuse. How the hell did that work when I never applied? Although, how peculiar my parents got when the academy was mentioned made me pause. They seemed stressed, and I didn't want to add to their worry until I had to. "I'm thinking fate always has a way of finding you."

Mom's body stiffened and her fingers stilled. "Some things are better kept hidden."

"What do you mean?" They were definitely hiding something from me, and I didn't like it.

Mom took a deep breath and relaxed her shoulders. "I'm sorry honey." She stepped in closer and grabbed my hand. "I'm just having a hard time with you growing up." With her free hand, she reached and tapped the quarter-moon crescent of my necklace. "The necklace looks perfect on you."

I gave a small smile and paused, making the words I nearly slipped out sit hard in my stomach. I wanted to reassure her, but I didn't want to outright lie to her. If Cole was serious, then he could show at any moment and take me away to the school. For some reason, I didn't think he was kidding either. "It's strange." That was the best I could muster due to the situation.

"Raven, it's time to go." Dad's voice called from the foyer. "We're going to be late."

"Oh, no." Mom dropped her hands back to her sides and sniffed. As she wiped underneath her eye, she chuckled. "Now, look what I've done. Upset us, and if we don't hurry, we'll be late."

At that point, I wasn't sure what to say or do. It felt as though we both were keeping secrets from one another. So I said the only words that were completely safe and true to say. "I love you."

"Baby girl, I love you too." She wrapped her arms around me, giving me one last quick hug before tugging me out the door. "I will say that's the ugliest outfit I've ever seen you in."

To say otherwise would have been a straight out lie. I hated the long red, graduation gowns and hats they made us wear. "Don't get me started."

As we made our way down the stairs, Dad smiled. "Look at our daughter all grown up."

"Hey now, don't start on her." Mom reached over and lovingly squeezed my arm. "I've already cried once. We need to go."

"Fine." Dad walked over and hugged me once. "Let's get going."

PARKING WAS horrendous at the school. The graduation was scheduled to begin in ten minutes, so I was later than what the teachers had required. The parking lot was full, which meant a lot of family and friends were attending the ceremony.

Dad made his own parking spot at the end of the lot, wedging himself between two cars.

I was going to complain, but that wouldn't have done any good.

As I slid out from the backseat, my eyes landed on a shiny, red

Audi that had the words Bloodshed Academy written in gothic letters on it. I reread the sticker over and over again, hoping I was only seeing things. Still, with each blink, the words didn't change no matter how hard I wished.

"Rave, are you okay?" Dad moved beside me and followed my gaze. His face paled, and he took a step back. "Liz …"

"What are you two gaping at?" Mom turned her head and took a sharp intake of breath.

What was I going to do? Maybe it was someone other than Cole that was coming to meet Greg. I mean, he is the strongest alpha next to his father in our pack. Maybe it was all a mix-up or a cruel joke. That definitely had to be it.

"I guess they're here to meet Greg." Mom took a deep breath and shook her head. "We better get going before they don't have any seats left."

"Are you …" Dad cringed.

"Yes ... Yes, I am." Mom cut him off, and her stance was rigid once more. "Now let's go. Raven can't miss her only graduation."

The rest of the way into the gym was in awkward silence. Each step of the way, I kept saying over and over in my head that they were here for Greg, not me. That was the only thing that made sense. By the time I reached the double doors that entered the gym, I'd lied to myself that they couldn't be here for me. That was until I took my first step into the gym.

He was right there, leaning against the wall only a few feet away.

A smirk spread across his devilishly handsome face as he raised his hand in the air and wiggled his fingers at me.

That's what he did to me the other night at the baseball game. The image had been burned into my mind.

His blond hair was styled in spikes in the front, and his black shirt hugged his athletic frame. He was hot and knew it, just like every vampire did.

A large, muscular guy beside him turned and faced me. His chocolate eyes seemed to burn into me, and he took a step toward me before stopping. He clenched his hands, and his shaggy brown hair fell into his face a little.

Damn, Cole brought a wolf shifter here. Why would he do that?

"You better hurry and take your seat." Mom glanced over at the two guys that had captured my attention. "Let's go sit on the other side, honey."

"Sounds perfect." Dad placed his hand at the base of my back and guided me to the center of the gym. "Knock 'em dead, honey." He leaned down and kissed the top of my head.

"You do realize I'm only walking across the stage?" I tried to make

a light joke, but I couldn't shake the feeling that both of the Bloodshed recruiters were staring straight at me.

Dad ignored my comment, and both he and Mom headed in the opposite direction, looking for a place to sit.

"What's wrong, Raven?" Greg appeared in front of me and smiled brightly.

"Nothing." I couldn't help but steal a glance over my shoulder. Of course, both Cole and his friend were still standing there.

"Oh, okay. Good." He reached up and placed his thumb under my chin, turning my head back in his direction. "Guess what Dad and I saw when we were walking in?"

A growl wanted to emanate from my chest, but I held it in. I hated when Greg treated me like a doll instead of a person. However, there was a growl from behind me.

The muscular boy who was with Cole appeared at my side, staring down Greg. "You should respect her more than that."

"Whoa." Greg lifted his chin and showed his teeth. "Why don't you mind your own business?" *Who the hell is this guy, Raven?*

I've never met him before. To be fair, I had no clue why this guy was acting this way.

"Hey, now." Cole appeared in between the guy and Greg. "It's getting late. Why don't you two go find your place?"

"Oh, you're the recruiter?" Greg tilted his head and crossed his arms over his chest.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Cole pushed his friend in the shoulder, making him back away.

"Well, then we have a problem." Greg's blue eyes began to glow. "Since we hadn't approved any of your kind to come here."

"Thanks, man." Cole glared at his friend for a second before spinning back around to face us. "Yes, I am. But right now, you both need to go and find your seats." He pointed behind where the teachers were climbing the stairs onto the raised platform. "We'll talk afterward."

Any trace of anger was removed from Greg's face. "Of course." He turned around and headed to the seats with a little bit of a skip to his step.

Not wanting to attract any additional attention, I headed straight to my seat, which happened to be right next to Sheila. Right as my bottom hit the seat, she turned my way. "Greg just told us that the vampire from Bloodshed is here now. I can't wait to see what happens after graduation."

Our principal stood at the podium and gave a large smile. "We're glad to have so many people here today to witness their loved ones graduating high school."

Do you think they'll take him right after graduation? Sheila moved in her seat and flipped her hair back. *I thought we'd have him all summer, but if they're here now … well, maybe they'll take him right after this.*

I have no clue. My stomach was already in knots knowing they weren't here for him, but I didn't want the shit to hit the fan. I'd gladly trade places with her. My wolf side cringed at that thought.

For the rest of the ceremony, I couldn't pay attention to anything. It was an hour later, and the whole time, I focused on what may happen when this was all over. Granted, I'd always known I wasn't going to be able to do everything I wanted because as a pack, we needed to stay together. Still, I'd have some kind of say in my life whether it be that I became a nurse, teacher, or even an accountant. Now it seemed as if any control that I may have had was gone.

Raven, aren't you coming? Sheila patted me on the arm and took off after the front of the line.

I jumped out of my seat and followed behind her. *Thanks.*

What's wrong with you? Sheila glanced over her shoulder and frowned. *You're not acting normal.*

Yeah, I bet she'd like to know. *Nothing, it just feels surreal.*

It wasn't long before it was my turn to go up the stairs. I climbed halfway and waited as they announced Sheila.

"Sheila Wilburn." The principal called out and clapped her hands as Sheila walked across the stage and grabbed her diploma.

"Raven Wright." I can do this. I hit the platform and headed straight to the principal. Mom and Dad cheered while Greg clapped down below.

There were only two other people after me, and the graduation would be over. Now, it was time to face my future.

Chapter Five

"Oh, honey. We're so proud." Mom was by my side in a flash.

My heart was pounding too hard. I needed to calm down, or everyone would know I was apprehensive.

"Baby, can you believe it." Greg appeared behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist. "We're free from this hell hole."

"It's bittersweet." Jerry shook his head and tilted his head toward mom. "Our babies are grown up, but at least, yours will be staying close."

"That's very true." Dad reached over and slapped Jerry on the back. "But you'll have a fighter when it's all said and done."

"He's already an amazing fighter." Ian appeared beside me but didn't even acknowledge my presence. "I can't wait until he teaches me everything he learns from that school."

"Unfortunately, he's not going to have that opportunity." Cole sauntered over with his buddy right behind him.

"If that's the case, why are you here?" Jerry turned around, and his nostrils flared.

"Because we're here for someone else." The muscular guy stepped forward and towered over Jerry. His mere presence was commanding.

"Oh, really?" Ian's eyes lit up. "Is it me?"

"Come on, Raven." Dad's voice tensed, and he grabbed my hand, pulling me apart from Greg. "It's time to go."

"Actually, that's not possible." Cole appeared in front of my Dad, blocking his path. He looked at me and winked. "See, I told you I'd see you again."

"You've met him before?" Greg's mouth dropped, and his face turned a red shade.

This was the moment I'd been dreading and praying it wouldn't happen. "At your game."

"But you've listened to me for the past week complaining about him never showing up." His breathing increased, and he looked past me to Cole.

"I bet she convinced him of picking her over you." Ian glared at me, and his nose wrinkled.

"You think I'd be so easily persuaded by a pretty face?" Cole's demeanor became rigid, and his face was a stone of indifference.

"What? No." Ian shook his head no and raised both hands. "I just meant …"

"Well, she's not going with you." Mom stepped in front of me,

shielding me from the vampire. She lifted her chin in challenge.

"I agree with Ms. Wright." Greg spread his shoulders and glared. "If I can't go, no one can. I'm the next alpha. Tell them, Dad."

The muscular guy faced Mom down. "If we leave without her, there will be severe repercussions."

"Of course, she'll go with you." Jerry clapped his son on the back.

"Are you being serious?" Greg's mouth dropped, and he jerked back as if he had been slapped. "Dad, you can't be agreeing to this."

"Greg, remember your place." Jerry's eyes glowed as he commanded his son to be silent. "If Bloodshed wants Raven, then so be it."

"What? No." Mom turned to face him with her mouth gaping open.

"Liz, she has to go." Dad's voice was strong, but I heard the rare tremble in it.

This whole situation was strange. I knew it wouldn't be great, but I didn't expect this. My wolf side was brimming with excitement.

"So, there we have it." Cole grabbed my hand and tugged.

His hand was warm and smooth. I'd expected it to be cold, but hell, what did I know. The last time he touched me, I had coke spilled over my hands. I'd only ever been around others like me.

"Hey, is everything okay over here?" The principal walked over and glanced at each one of us.

"I'm sorry. We must've been making a scene." Cole stepped in front of me and placed a hand on his chest. "It's just we're so super excited that our girl has finally graduated. We were just on our way out anyway."

Our girl? Why did that have a nice ring to it?

Why didn't you tell us about this? Mom's words were curt.

I'm sorry. I really didn't think this would happen. The wolf half of me had been excited and anticipating while my human side had been in complete denial.

"Yes, please do." The principal pulled at the neckline of his button-down shirt. "You're making others that are trying to leave out this door feel uncomfortable. They are walking around the whole gym, exiting the other side."

"Let's go outside." Jerry motioned to the door, and Greg grumbled, following along behind him.

As we stepped outside, the parking lot was at a gridlock. Everyone was leaving at the same time, probably meeting family for lunch to celebrate further. Our group marched outside and disappeared into the small wooded area by the school.

I can't believe you didn't tell me. Greg's grasp was firm and rigid. *You knew I wanted to go there.*

It's not my fault. His attitude was pissing me off. It wasn't like I

asked to be the one going there instead of him.

"Now, let's get to the point." Jerry turned around to face Cole and his friend. "She can go on one condition."

"Is that so?" Cole chuckled and leaned back a little while crossing his arms.

"Yes." Jerry pointed at his son. "She can go if you take him as well."

"Did you hear that, Rage?" Cole turned and looked at his friend. "It's a buy one, get one free deal."

Rage's eyes were glued on my and Greg's interlocked hands. "The free one isn't appealing at all."

"That's kinda funny." Cole grinned and tapped his fingers on his lip. "You see, he and I never agree, but I guess today changes that."

"What's wrong with my son?" Jerry grew rigid, and his face turned the color of a tomato.

"He's mostly bark and no bite." Rage's voice was raspy and dead sexy.

"And what, she isn't?" Greg dropped my hand and took a step toward them.

I wanted this to all be over, but who knew what was going to happen next.

"It doesn't matter. We were told to come get her," Cole said as he pointed at me. "So that's what we're going to do."

Mom and Dad walked over and gave me a group hug. Dad's comforting voice filled my head. *If you need us, we're only a phone call away.*

I hadn't even thought of that. I wouldn't be able to mind link with them from that far away. *I love you.*

Listen to me. Mom's voice turned urgent. *Don't trust anyone. Make them earn it.* There was an edge to her tone that I'd never heard before.

Dragging this out wasn't going to prevent the inevitable. I took a deep breath and pulled back. *I'll be careful.*

"Well, uh …" Greg refused to look at me and focused on the ground. "See ya later." He turned and stalked off, not even bothering to give me a hug goodbye.

You should be ashamed. Ian shook his head and took a few steps back. *I knew you were opportunistic.*

The last thing I wanted to do was deal with Ian, so I ignored him. He soon huffed and turned around to follow Greg.

"I'm sorry about my son." Jerry's lips spread into a tight smile. "It's just he had his hopes set on it."

"Yeah, but it's not like I asked for this." Even though the thought was becoming more and more appealing, I never dreamed this would

happen.

"We need to get going." Cole glanced at his watch and sighed. "If we aren't back to the Academy by ten, it'll get chaotic."

If this wasn't what he considered chaotic, I was afraid to see his definition. I glanced at my parents one last time before turning to follow Rage and Cole.

As we approached the Audi, Rage stepped over and opened the front passenger door.

Now the question was which guy did I want to sit behind? I paused for a moment.

Rage motioned to the door. "I'm not holding this open for my health."

That was not something I had expected. "Oh, I thought you were sitting there."

"The correct response is to sit and tell him 'thank you.'" Cole arched an eyebrow with a smug smile on his face.

My heart hammered against my chest as I headed to the open door and slid past him to sit. Rage was intense, strong, and freaking hot. "Thank you." I took a deep breath, and his earthy scent filled my nose. He smelled like home.

He shut the door, cutting me off from my strange emotion. As he slid behind me, the sense of comfort came back. "Okay, I need to go grab my clothes." I had refused to pack, assuming Cole was messing with me.

"No, you won't need them." Cole started the car and glanced back at his friend. "Can you at least hunker down so I can see backing up?"

"Use the fucking back up camera, moron." Rage crossed his arms and straightened his back so he could sit even higher.

"Backup cameras are for losers who can't drive." Cole leaned over the center console, trying to glance out the back window.

"Well, at least you know why I suggested it to you." Rage quirked an eyebrow and looked down his nose.

A giggle escaped before I could hold it back.

"You are one lucky wolf." Cole reversed quickly. He quickly placed an arm in front of me, holding me against the seat, and slammed on the brakes.

Two large hands gripped my seat. "Did you really think that would work? We have fast reflexes just like your kind."

"It was only a warning." Cole chuckled then opened his mouth. Two long incisors protruded, and the ends looked wickedly sharp.

Any sense of comfort I'd had vanished just like that. It had never fully registered that he was a vampire, at least not until now.

"If you know what's in your best interest, fear isn't something you want others to smell." Cole licked his lips and stared right at my neck.

“It makes the predator in a vampire come out.”

Yeah, like that was going to make me feel better. I counted to ten and let my wolf surface a little more. I always felt stronger in that form.

“There you go.” Cole focused back on the road, and soon we were pulling out of the parking lot.

“Where exactly are we going?” Probably a stupid question, but I wanted to know.

“You haven’t even researched to find out the university’s location?” Rage’s voice was filled with disbelief.

“Honestly, no.” I glanced out the window, watching as my city passed by. “I never even considered Bloodshed an option.”

“This has to be a mistake.” Rage groaned from the backseat. “Tell me this is a joke and we aren’t taking her there.”

What happened to Mr. Nice guy? I shouldn’t have been surprised. Normally in my experience, muscular hot guys were always douches.

“No, it’s not.” Cole tapped his fingers along the wheel and glanced back at Rage. “I saw a glimmer of it, but nothing more than that.”

“You do realize I’m right here.” I despised when people did this sort of shit. Greg and Ian did this to me all the freaking time.

“Have you done any research about the school?” Rage leaned forward, and his dark short hair was now in complete disarray.

No, I hadn’t at all, but I’d be damned if I were to admit it to him. “Yeah, it’s where all the alphas go.” One point for me.

“Gods, is that all you know?” Rage leaned back and threw his hands in the air. “She’s going to get herself killed. Let’s take her back right now.”

“Stop it.” Cole rolled his eyes and shook his head. “You’re being a drama queen.”

“Are you fucking kidding me?” Rage huffed and crossed his arms. “Who found her?”

I clenched my hands together, trying to prevent myself from punching the guy. He had some nerve.

“What is wrong with you?” Cole’s forehead wrinkled as he messed with the air conditioning knob. “Here, let’s cool you off. It was Isadora who found her.”

“Shit. Okay.” Rage dropped his arms to his sides and sighed. “Then we need to school her before we get there.”

“Oh, how you’ve changed into such a caring recruiter all of a sudden.” Cole chuckled and glanced over his shoulder. “But yea, let’s help her out. I’d hate for her to get eaten on the first day.”

“Eaten?” Seriously. Please tell me he’s kidding.”

“Pretty much, especially if you can’t handle yourself.” Rage pulled out his phone and began typing.

“This school is so much more than what you think.” Cole pulled onto the interstate, heading South toward Chattanooga. “It’s about who is the strongest and smartest.”

“Yeah, like I said, alpha.” The description for the school was what an alpha was supposed to encompass.

“No, you can have a stupid leader.” Cole glanced at Rage. “I mean, look at him.”

“Bloodshed is a university like no other.” Rage leaned forward, turning his back to Cole and his face to me. “There isn’t a set date for your graduation. It’s a series of trials and tribulations. You either graduate or fail.”

“And in some cases, die.” Cole leaned over so he could see me and winked. “Let’s hope it’s not the latter for you.”

“What do you mean by trials?” No one had ever mentioned this before. I was beginning to think I shouldn’t have come.

“That, my dear, is something we aren’t allowed to tell you.” Cole reached over and shoved Rage back in his seat.

“Dude, not cool.” Rage grumbled and crossed his arms. “We can’t tell you what you’ll go through. Each student has their individual needs, and no one student is the same.”

“Think about it. Do you think vampires have the same strengths and weaknesses as any other shifter?” Cole placed his hands on the steering wheel and focused. “Now then, take it a step further. Do you think Rage has the same temperament, strength, and personality as you?”

When he put it that way, it made sense. I guessed there wasn’t a cookie-cutter way to each person’s development. “Still, we would have a few things in common.”

“Right.” Cole glanced at me and grinned. “But not everything.”

The farther away I got from home, the more uncertain I became. I wasn’t sure what to expect anymore.

Chapter Six

The entire ride to Bloodshed went by both painfully slow and too fast for me. We continued to travel in silence except for when Rage grumbled that he was hungry and we had to run through a McDonald's drive-thru for his sustenance. He had wanted me to eat some of the food too, but I couldn't. My stomach revolted at the mere idea of food.

When we cruised through New Orleans, I wasn't surprised. Even if I hadn't looked into this university, it would make sense that it would be in a paranormal hot spot. What I wasn't prepared for though was Cole pulling into Tulane University.

Even though it was dark, with my wolf's eyesight, I could see clearly. It contained well maintained older buildings, a lot of trees, and an outside feeling all around. Was this some kind of joke? "I thought we were going to Bloodshed Academy."

"You do realize there are humans that live here too, right?" Rage quirked an eyebrow at me, and humor-filled his eyes.

"Yeah, but …" I still wasn't following what that had to do with supernaturals.

"Rage, she's onto something." Cole's blue eyes lit, and a predatory grin crossed his face. "Why stay hidden when we could creep everyone out? Maybe we could put a statue of me out here and have blood dripping down my face."

"Instead of acting like an asshole, you could just explain it to her." Rage leaned over and punched Cole in the arm.

Despite Cole being smaller than Rage, he didn't budge an inch. "Aw, did I hurt yours or her feelings? Right now, I'm having a hard time telling the difference."

"I kind of agree with him." I pointed to Rage and crossed my hands over my chest.

"Of course, you would." Cole stuck his tongue out at me. "Shifters before misters."

"That doesn't even make sense." Rage's forehead creased, and he shook his head.

"You both are shifters and," Cole said as he pointed between him and Rage, "we're boys, so misters."

"Oh, dear God." Rage rubbed the bridge of his nose. "When was the last time you fed?"

"Not too long ago, but I wouldn't mind feeding off someone here." His blue eyes landed on me.

"Don't even think about it." A low growl vibrated deep in Rage's

chest.

“Can we get back to the university?” Cole was too high energy. I thought vampires were supposed to be all moody and depressed.

“Bloodshed is hidden by this school.” Rage leaned forward in his seat again, focusing solely on me.

Having his undivided attention was unnerving. It sort of felt like there were butterflies in my belly. “Where?”

“The school is known for its exclusivity, which means most of the applicants are supernaturals. Tulane is the name that humans know it as, and even a few of them attend. But the back section is spelled to repel humans, and that’s where Bloodshed is hidden.” Rage pointed out the window.

We came upon a gray stoned building that had an imposing fence. A gold emblem with Bloodshed Academy was attached to the gates.

“I thought you said this place was a secret from humans.” There was a huge ass sign that stated it all right there.

Cole stopped in front of the gates and pulled out his phone. He pressed a button, and the doors began to swing open. “They wouldn’t have ever made it this far.”

Within moments, we were driving through the gate and took a left toward a full parking lot. The gray stone building was huge, and there were two smaller buildings behind it.

The main thing that comforted me was all the trees surrounding the whole campus. At least there was ample space for me to run.

“Welcome to your new home.” Cole pulled into a reserved spot and lifted both hands up.

Yeah, I wasn’t sure it was quite home yet.

Rage swung open his door and gracefully exited.

That’s really nice. He didn’t even say goodbye. So, when my door opened for me, I was surprised to see Rage standing there.

“Oh … uh … thanks.” Yeah, real smooth, Raven. I clambered out, trying not to feel awkward.

Cole leaned on the hood of the car and used his arms to prop his head up. “I could watch this all day.”

I glared at him and leaned on my back leg. “Watch what?”

“Oh, no.” He stood and waved both hands in front of himself. “Please, ignore me, and both of you continue this tragic excuse for flirting.”

“Cole, shut the fuck up.” Rage gave him a warning look.

“Aw.” Cole grinned while wiggling his eyebrows. “Did I hit a nerve?”

Between Rage’s earthy smell filling my nose and the testosterone match these two were in, I had to get away. I took several steps in the direction of the school when the sound of crashing footsteps in the

woods to our left caught my attention. It didn't sound like a wolf. The feet landed too hard and so loud it had to be a much larger shifter like a bear or dragon.

My wolf surged forward, asking for control, but I shouldn't be worried. Surely Cole and Rage would alert me if something was off.

However, the creature was getting closer and closer.

My heart began to race, and I glanced back to see Cole and Rage still bickering.

A loud roar filled my ears as one of the largest bears I'd ever seen came barreling out of the trees straight toward me.

My wolf forced its way to the front, and then blackness engulfed me.

THE SCENT of lavender filled my nose, and the tapping of someone's foot woke me. *Where the hell am I?* My eyelids were so heavy. I slowly opened them. There were rails on both sides of my bed, and the white ceiling seemed higher than normal.

"Sleeping beauty has finally awakened." Cole's polished voice seemed to dance across the room.

"Now isn't the time for humor." The lady who sat by the door stood and made her way to me. Each time she took a step, her black heels clicked, and she adjusted her red suit jacket over her matching skirt. "You both better be glad that I showed up when I did."

Cole's smile left his face, and he glanced at the ground. "You're right."

Rage remained silent, but his dark eyes were on me.

"What happened?" Flashes of the bear racing toward me flitted through my mind. "Oh, God. Did I hurt him?"

The room filled with silence.

"Right now, what we need to focus on is that you don't have control over your wolf." The lady's sharp features were emphasized by the short, dark hair that barely reached past her ears. Her sparkling green eyes were a stark contrast to everything else. "My recruiters weren't very observant, which is disappointing, but in their defense, we hadn't expected you to be that out of sync with your wolf."

"But my wolf and I are fine." I was lying, and somehow this woman knew it.

Cole frowned. "I told you there seemed to be some kind of disconnect. I saw it the first time I saw her."

"Even more reason you should've been paying attention." Her stern voice echoed in the room. "You even had Rage go with you in case you needed help."

Of course, that's why Rage was there. Great, now he thinks I'm

weak and stupid. “I don’t know what happened, but I’ve never blacked out before.”

“That’s because you’d never felt that threatened before.” The lady sighed and walked over to me. “This is not how I expected our first meeting to happen. Nonetheless, this is it. As your headmaster, the first thing we need to work on is your connection with your wolf. You won’t even last a full year if you don’t connect with your wolf completely.”

Those words didn’t sit well with me. “Are you threatening me?”

Her eyes turned hard, and she frowned. “Take it how you will.” She glanced at both of the guys. “I expect better, or there will be consequences.” She turned with her head high and walked out the door.

“Is she always like that?” A headmaster should be supportive and caring. That woman was not like that at all.

“Yeah, Isadora is always like that, but we messed up.” Rage closed his eyes and shook his head. “How are you?”

Is he being serious? “Well, let’s see. I was forced to go with you guys to come here, a bear charged me, and I blacked out. Oh … and the headmaster just threatened me. I’d say it’s been a pretty shitty day.”

“See,” Cole said, grinning at Rage and pointing at me, “we’re totally going to be best friends.”

A low growl emanated from Rage’s chest. “I sure hope not.”

“You better stop.” Cole arched an eyebrow, and the humor fell from his face. “She’s going to need a friend and someone on her side.”

“And it can’t be me?” Rage’s voice turned low and raspy. If I hadn’t been so upset, I’d probably be a drooling mess at this very moment.

“You know why.” Cole’s face was a mask of indifference.

“Guys, I’m really tired.” I couldn’t handle this, not now. I needed a bed and none of their bickering.

One of the guys' phones rang, but neither moved to answer it.

“That’s the fourth time it’s rung in the last ten minutes.” Cole crossed his arms and tilted his head down. “Aren’t you going to answer it?”

Rage took a deep breath and stared straight into Cole’s eyes. “No.”

“The longer it takes you, the worse it’s going to be.” Cole marched toward me and smiled. “Come on, let’s get you to your room.”

“I have a room?” Something weird was going on between them, and I didn’t have the energy to even want to figure it out.

“Of course you do.” Cole glanced at Rage. “You need to go deal with that situation before things get any worse.”

“Fine.” Rage’s dark eyes glanced once more at me. “Sleep well.”

“You’re lucky.” Cole gently grabbed my arm, pulling me from the room. “You only have one roommate, which is rare.”

For some reason, I hadn’t even contemplated that I’d have a roommate. “Oh, is she nice?”

“She’s been at the university for a year now, so she’ll be able to help you learn the ins and outs.” Cole’s warm smile returned to his face.

“Oh, so you guys won’t be around any longer?” Why did that bother me? I’d assumed that we would hang out still. Obviously proving how much of a freshman I really was. Wait … What would I be? They didn’t have freshmen here. Maybe fresh meat?

“I’ve already decided we’re going to be friends, so there is no getting rid of me.” He pulled me down a long hallway. The ceilings were high, and the walls were dark brown.

I glanced behind us, looking for Rage, but almost slipped on the smooth pale floor.

“Hey now, I thought shifters had good balance.” Cole slipped his arm around my waist.

“Yeah, I normally do, but I feel off tonight, and I …” I cut myself off. He didn’t have to know I was looking for Rage.

A loud voice echoed from behind us. “Ragey, where the hell have you been?”

Several feet away stood a girl with dark red hair and a figure to die for. She placed her hands on her hips as she glanced down the hallway in front of her.

“Ashley, I told you I had to go with Cole to recruit someone.” Rage sighed, and his voice sounded tired.

“Come on, let’s go.” Cole tugged on me, but for some reason, I had to stay. I couldn’t remove my eyes from this Ashley.

“He’s never asked you to go on a recruit with him before, so why now?” She pouted, emphasizing her already plump lips. “I’ve missed you.”

“He needed a wolf shifter for back up.” Rage appeared but didn’t seem to notice both Cole and me standing there.

She eliminated the distance between her and Rage and wrapped her arms around his waist. “Well, you’re back now, and that’s all that matters.” She raised up on her tiptoes and placed her lips upon his.

Not able to watch their kiss, I turned and began moving once more with Cole. Surprisingly, he kept his mouth shut until we made our way through one of the back doors.

The fresh air filled my lungs, and I focused on breathing. I was upset over Rage and that girl even though I had no right to be. So what if his lips were on another girl. I had a boyfriend at home, waiting for me. Somehow reminding myself of that made it worse and

not better.

Chapter Seven

After a few moments, Cole asked, “Hey, are you okay?” He led me toward the building on the left.

Tonight, the humidity was high, and it wasn’t even officially summer yet. The moon was full, which tugged on my wolf inside. There was no way I was going to attempt shifting after what happened earlier. “Yeah, just taking it all in.” I didn’t want Cole to know how upset I was over Rage and his girlfriend.

His eyes narrowed as he examined me but then sighed. “It’s a lot. That back there …”

Oh, hell no. We weren’t going to talk about Rage, so I cut him off. “What’s my roommate like?”

A small smile spread across his face. “Well, she’s no me.”

“At least that one prayer was answered.” Each step I took made me more nervous than the last. The headmaster already wasn’t impressed with me, and now I had to meet some kind of supernatural that would be my roommate. I wasn’t even sure what to expect at this point.

“Lookie there.” Cole reached over and tapped me on the nose. “Even when you’ve had one hell of a day, you still have some bite. Be glad. You’ll need it.”

“If you were going for comfort, let me tell ya; you failed.” If these were his pep talks, I’d have hated to see what the opposite would be.

We reached the building, which was much more modern than the main one. It appeared to be a steel type building with large portions of glass. Many had curtains that were closed so no one could see inside.

“Wait.” I needed a minute to collect myself. In one day, my whole world had been ripped apart, and I was off-balance. I needed a chance to center myself before another new obstacle was presented to me.

“Of course.” Cole paused and took a step back, giving me space.

Despite what he tries to put off, Cole seemed like a good person. Maybe we’d be friends after all. I didn’t have many true friends back home. I always had to be cautious and tried to blend in. Still, look how far that had gotten me. It’d be nice to have a friend that I didn’t have to hide from.

I lifted my head and glanced at the moon. It was a crystal-clear night, and the view was gorgeous. A distant howl filled the air. Maybe one day that’ll be me.

“It’s okay to feel overwhelmed.” Cole leaned against the side of the building and smiled. “Each one of us here feels that way pretty regularly.”

“Really?” For some reason, that made me calmer. It was nice knowing I wasn’t alone.

“Yeah, but the first thing you’ve got to learn is not to show it.” Cole stepped toward me and placed his hands on my shoulders. He leaned in so we were looking eye to eye. “This place is where the cream of the crop is. If you show any weakness, they will pounce. Feel it, talk to me about it, but keep it locked inside if you want to survive.”

He was right. The one thing all strong supernaturals wanted to do was dominate others when threatened. I was a new threat coming in and apparently not in sync with my wolf. I was already off to a great start too. “But my wolf and I …”

“It’s okay.” His normally ice-blue eyes seemed warm. “We are all here because we’ve got weaknesses. We still aren’t ready to be the leader each of us needs to be. You just don’t admit it and refuse to break down in front of anyone. Bloodshed is named that for a reason. This is a cutthroat school. You have to keep your friends close and your enemies even closer. Do you understand?”

“So I shouldn’t even trust you?” At least back home, we were all one pack.

“I’ll let you make that call yourself.” Cole dropped his hands to his sides and winked. “Now, let’s go get you settled.”

Hanging out here wasn’t going to fix anything. “Alright, let’s do this.” I took a deep breath and opened the door.

“Look at you go.” Cole chuckled behind me.

I marched through the hallway, which strangely resembled a hotel. The walls were a light grey, and the carpet was a slightly shaggy medium grey. I had no clue where I was heading so I kept going straight and turned down a hallway on the right, which led me into a large lounge area. There was a group of girls sitting on two couches that faced each other.

A coppery smell hit me hard, making me notice the two girls on one couch, drinking from blood bags. The two on the other couch leaned back, talking as if this was an everyday occurrence.

“Are we just going to walk around a while, or are you ready for me to take you to your room?” Cole was attempting to hide a smile, but it didn’t work.

“You said to take charge.” Did he already forget the conversation we had just a few minutes ago? “So I did.”

He raised both hands in the air and chuckled. “True, but it’s okay for you to follow and let someone else lead the way when you have no clue where you’re going.”

Clearly, I was in over my head. “Well, this is going great.”

“Come on, Ravey.” Cole wrapped his hand around my waist and

tugged me to the left where there was a set of elevators.

"Cole?" One of the girls stood and tossed the bag of blood on the couch. Her long, jet-black hair bounced as she made it over to us. She pulled her v-neck hunter green shirt down which made her cleavage more pronounced. "What are you doing here?"

Wow, she hadn't even looked in my direction, acting as if I were invisible.

"Showing our new addition to her room." Cole's hand tightened on my side, and he frowned. "Not that it's any of your business." His voice took on an edge.

"Don't be so mean to Jordan." The other vampire glared at me as she approached. Her fingernails were painted blood red, which almost blended in with the bag she was clutching. Her long, dirty blonde hair fell past her butt, and her light green eyes had a ring of red.

"Madison, why don't you mind your own fucking business?" Cole's cold tone surprised me.

"I've never seen you get so cozy with a new recruit." Jordan's eyes landed on me. The same red ring was around her golden eyes. "Honestly, I haven't seen you this close to any girl that you weren't about to fuck. Should I warn her about you?"

That was surprising seeing as Cole had been nice to me from the start. "Have you ever considered that you were a little too late with that warning?" The words fell from my mouth before I had time to think it through.

Cole's fingers dug into my side, pulling me even closer somehow.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Jordan's beautiful face contorted into a scowl. "Did I give you permission to talk to me?"

"Well, it's a good thing I didn't ask." My wolf surged forward, and my eyesight began to darken.

"You better restrain your mutt." Jordan spat the words as she wrinkled her nose. "She's beginning to smell like the dog she really is."

"That's enough, you two." Cole took a step into the girls' space, but his normally beautiful face contorted into something completely different. His ice-blue eyes narrowed, and a look of pure disgust filled his face. "Go back to your gossip, and get the hell out of our way."

I was so glad I wasn't on the receiving end because I'd be scared shitless.

"Fine." Madison lifted her chin and grabbed her friend's arm. "Let's leave them to whatever they're doing. It's not like he'll pay any attention to her in the morning."

I had thought Sheila was a pain in the ass, but now I realized how wrong I'd been. She still had morals and was nice. These girls were ruthless, and I began to understand why Cole had warned me a few

minutes ago.

Jordan glanced at me once more with pure hatred. “Fine, but this isn’t over.”

Great, already had an enemy, and I hadn’t been here for … wait, how long had I been here. I wasn’t entirely sure since I’d blacked out.

“Come on, Ravey.” Cole released his grip from my waist and took my hand. “Let’s get out of here.” He walked over to the elevators and pushed the up button.

The elevator immediately dinged, and the doors opened. We both moved inside. Once the door was closed, he pushed the number seven and turned toward me. “I’m sorry about them.”

“It’s not your fault.” I wanted to ask a question but wasn’t sure I could handle the answer. “Why did they have a red ring to their eyes?”

“You really haven’t been around other paranormals, have you?” The Cole I’d met was back now. A small smirk sat on his face, and his body was relaxed.

“No, I haven’t. That thought hadn’t even occurred to me till now.” Granted, I knew the basics but never had real-world experience. Our pack back home was close-knit. Somehow, even though my parents had been outsiders, they were welcomed with open arms. Apparently, our family was the first outsiders the pack had ever accepted.

“Well, luckily you’ve found an ally with me.” He winked and waved both of his hands with his pointer finger out in my direction.

“Please, never do that again.” I couldn’t help but giggle a little. Cole seemed sincere, and for some reason, I felt like I could trust him. “But really, will you answer my question?”

“It’s because she was feeding.” He leaned on the door and rested his head. “Whenever a vampire feeds and shortly thereafter, the red ring is the tell.”

Okay, that made sense. They both had been drinking from blood bags. “Got it.”

The elevator dinged, and the doors slid open. “Come on, your room is this way.” He stepped out in front and went to the right. “We got you rooming with someone trustworthy.”

For some reason, I trusted him. “Thanks. I need all the friends I can find.”

“I will warn you she is slightly different.” Cole stopped at the door on the right which was labeled 716. “But both Isadora and I thought this would be the best placement for the both of you.”

Great. *Here’s hoping that she won’t attack me.*

He knocked on the door and then placed a key in the lock, turning the knob. The door swung open, and he reached in, turning on the lights.

A large couch and television were placed in the center between the openings to two hallways. Right across from the room was a decent sized kitchen that included a table for four.

"Holy crap. I was thinking this would be more like a university dorm." This place appeared to be a luxury style apartment instead of a dormitory.

"Remember the cream of the crop of the supernatural worlds attend this school." Cole entered the room and plopped himself on the black leather sofa. "Don't get me wrong … your classes and training will be horrendous, but we get to live in luxury."

I glanced down the hallway that was closest to the door. It had a door on the right, and at the end was a bathroom. "So we don't even have to share showers with the whole floor?"

"You don't even have to share with your roommate either." He stood and motioned for me to follow him down the hallway. He stopped at the first doorway and opened it. "This is your room."

The room was twice as big as the one I had back home. There was a queen bed sitting in the middle with a teal comforter on top. The room had a walk-in closet to the right. I even had a chest of drawers and a dresser. "This is huge, and teal is my favorite color." I couldn't stop myself from going to the closet and opening it up. There were clothes that I'd never seen before hanging in there.

"The closet is full." I flipped on the light and took note of all the various button-down shirts, plaid skirts, a few pairs of jeans, and comfortable shirts.

"Remember me telling you that we didn't need to go by your house." Cole stepped into the room and placed his hands in his jean pockets. "This is why."

I looked at the labels, and they were exactly my size. "But how is this possible?"

"We have our ways." He shrugged and glanced around. "Do you like it?"

"I love it." Even the jeans and shirts were name brands. "But it still blows my mind."

"Once the headmaster locates you, she knows certain things. She knows your favorite colors, and I was able to size you up when meeting you at the baseball game. It's one of my party tricks."

"That's not very comforting." Even though I shouldn't have been all that surprised at people's abilities anymore.

"Oh, come on." Cole ran a hand over my comforter and smiled. "It's not that bad."

"Says the creeper that sized me up." It was strange that in such a short time, I'd become comfortable with Cole. I just hoped it didn't change now that I was attending the school.

“Stop.” Cole chuckled and pointed at me. “Now let’s go check out your bathroom and see if we can find your new roommate.”

The bathroom part sounded fun, but I wasn’t excited about meeting my roommate after my last two encounters with students. That girl kissing Rage flashed through my head. My wolf growled at the sight, and I had no clue why.

“Earth to Ravey.” Cole waved his hand in front of my face.

“Sorry, I zoned out.” I had to get my act together and fast. I took a deep breath and forced a smile on my face. “Let’s do this.”

“Okay, stop.” Cole laughed and rubbed a hand down his face. “Your face is kinda scary, so maybe you need a few more minutes before meeting her.”

“Jackass.” I stuck my tongue out at him and then forced an even cheesier smile. “I’ll have you know this look works all the time.”

“Probably because they’re too scared to move quickly and run.” He lifted both hands in surrender. “Just please, don’t hurt me.”

My smile fell, and my mind went straight to the bear incident. “Did I hurt the bear?”

“He’s fine.” Cole walked up to the door and opened it. “Let’s go meet your roommate. That should liven things up.”

I wasn’t going to get anything out of him, so I decided I may as well suck it up and move on. “Alright.” I marched out the door and back toward the den.

“Once you get settled in, you’ll feel a lot better.” Cole walked past me and stepped into the other hallway. “Jess, are you here?”

“Cole?” A musical voice answered him. “Is she here?”

A door opened, and Jess ran down the hallway. She skidded into the room, and her purple eyes landed on me. “You must be Raven.”

“Yes.” I couldn’t help my short response. This girl was mesmerizing. Her long ash blonde hair cascaded down her back, and she wore a small teal tank top with yoga pants.

“It is a little overwhelming, but don’t worry. You’ll get the hang of it in time.” Her pink lips spread into a smile, and light reflected off of her small diamond nose piercing.

“She’s already run into Jordan and Madison.” Cole arched an eyebrow and shook his head.

“I hate those bitches, but at least I didn’t date one of them.” She tilted her head and sauntered up to Cole.

It wasn’t ’til then that I realized just how short she was. She only came up to Cole’s shoulders, and I was at least a head taller than her. “Really … You dated one of them?”

“Dated is a strong word.” Cole cringed and glanced down at the ground. “It was more of a Netflix and chill sort of deal.”

“Wow, look who found some manners while they were gone.” Jess

giggled, which sounded like bells ringing.

"What are you?" The words left my mouth before I could stop them.

"I like her." She tilted her head again and turned to face me. "First off, what do I smell like to you?"

This must be some sort of trick, but what did I have to lose? "You smell like sunshine and rain." It was an odd combination.

"I always like knowing what I smell like to others." She headed into the kitchen and called over her shoulder. "I'm fae."

"Oh, so you smell differently to everyone?" That very idea was beyond my comprehension. Everyone had their own unique smell, so that didn't seem plausible.

"No, but that confirmed what I thought." She grabbed a bottle of water and twisted the lid off. "You don't feel supernatural to me, so it's odd."

"Well, I assure you I am." Although at this point, I didn't have a handle on my wolf. I wasn't sure what it all meant. "I hate to do this, but I've gotta get some rest. I'm beat."

Cole came over and wrapped me in a big, warm hug, and his cotton candy scent was comforting. "Of course, I'm beat too. So, I'll head on out." He turned and saluted Jess. "Bye."

Both Jess and I watched Cole walk out the door. When the door clicked shut, she nodded in my direction. "Get some sleep. You're going to need it for tomorrow." She winked at me and headed back to her room.

Was that some kind of warning, or was she just being kind? At this point, I wasn't sure of anything.

Chapter Eight

A knock on the door jarred me awake. “Hey, you up?” Jess’s feminine voice called from behind the door.

“No, but I am now.” I glanced around, getting my bearings straight.

“Get your uniform on, and get your ass out here. We’re going to miss breakfast.” The door opened, and Jess came barreling into the room.

This had to be some kind of weird dream. *Would someone I barely know just invite herself into my room?* I pinched myself, which made me flinch. Ouch. That hurt.

She walked into my closet, and the sound of clothes hangers clanging against the metal shelving infiltrated my ears. “Are you needing to borrow something?”

“Uh, no.” She stepped out of the closet with a white button-down shirt that tied at the bottom and a red plaid uniform. “You’ve got to wear something acceptable but still show a little skin.” She threw the items on my bed. “Here, put these on.”

My blurry eyes seemed to focus and noticed that she had on a gray shirt with the same skirt. “Go put these on and get ready. I’m getting hangry, which is not good for either one of us.”

For some reason, the thought of her angry scared me. The super nice ones were able to flip a whole one-eighty if the situation presented itself. “Yes, ma’am.” I grabbed the clothes and headed for the bathroom.

It took me by surprise that everything I needed seemed to be there. My favorite jasmine shampoo was in the shower along with my usual makeup. I jumped into the shower, washing quickly and dried off. Within minutes, I was dressed and ready. I put on my favorite pink lipstick and fluffed my hair so it had a little volume. The humidity would make it limp within seconds otherwise.

Jess was waiting for me in the den. “Thank God, I think I’m turning into Betty White. This may be a snickers type of emergency.”

“Let’s go. We can’t have that.” I restrained myself from laughing … just barely.

We hurried down the hallway, and she punched the elevator button. “So, you’re already going to be on Jordan’s bad side. Be ready for it. Vampire-wise, she’s the head bitch in control.”

“Wait. Why would I be on her bad side?” Even though I figured as much, having it confirmed made my insides cold.

“It’s all because of Cole and how he treats you.” Jess spelled it out

for me just as the door opened.

That didn't make any sense. I followed behind her and leaned against the elevator wall. Somehow, we were the only two people inside. "How is that my fault?"

"There are three men here that any girl would die to have." She held three fingers up and touched each one as she named them. "Cole, Rage, and Damien. They started the Academy at about the same time and have been here three years. They haven't left this place yet because of how much value they bring Isadora. When another group comes along that can help in the way they can, they'll head off to their own graduation."

"Okay." Still, it didn't make any sense to me, but at least I knew the guys were around twenty-one.

"Rage has been in a *relationship* for a year, and the girl, Ashley, would cut any bitch that gets close to him. He's only using her for one thing. I still don't know why he picked her, but he didn't ask my opinion." She sighed dramatically and rolled her eyes. "So that really just leaves Cole and Damien up for grabs."

My wolf whimpered, and I forced my face to remain indifferent. "Well, fated mates are nonexistent these days."

"That's not true. They are rare, but not impossible." The elevator opened, and she stepped out before turning to me. "Are you okay? You kinda look like you might need to take a dump or something."

Great, right when I thought I was being smooth and unreadable, I look constipated. "No, sorry. Was thinking about something."

"Girl, we need to work on your thinking face." She sighed and shook her head. "Anywho, all three guys are jackasses. Only makes them even more dreamy, and Isadora has taken to them."

"So, I've met Cole and Rage, but what's Damien like?" I had to get my mind off of focusing on Rage and that girl.

"Damien is kind of a loner, and he'll only really associate with Rage and Cole." A small smile spread across her face, and her cheeks turned rosy. "He's a bear shifter so …"

Jess was still talking, but I couldn't focus on her words any longer. I attacked a bear last night. Could that have been him? Did I hurt Cole and Rage's best friend?

"We've got to work on your zoning out thing." Jess opened the door and motioned for me to walk in.

"I'm sorry. Everything is still a little weird for me." I stepped outside, and the warm sun hit my skin. It rejuvenated me a little bit. I was determined to grab Cole and make him tell me everything.

"I get that. It's hard taking all this in." We moved along the sidewalk that connected the dorms to the main building. "Hell, let's be real. I'm still not acclimated, not really, and I've been here a year."

That was hard to believe. Jess was nice, gorgeous, and sweet. “Well, if you aren’t, then there is no telling if I’ll ever be.”

“Not everyone is welcoming and accepting.” Her face dropped a little, but she shook it off and flipped her hair over her shoulder. “Enough of me being a Debbie Downer.”

We entered through the set of double doors that led us into a modern connection between the main building and the cafeteria. The connector was all glass, and I glanced through, noting there were several tables and chairs. Students were scattered throughout with open books.

As soon as we made our way inside, the smell of bacon and eggs made my stomach grumble.

“Come on, we’ll grab some food up here.” Jess motioned for me to follow her to the middle of the cafeteria. “Let’s get it before they start packing up.”

My eyes were so focused on the food that I didn’t even see Jordan. She stuck out her foot right as I was taking a step, and I fell to the ground hard.

“For a wolf shifter, you are pretty damn clumsy.” She giggled and glanced at Madison next to her. “And she did that right in front of Cole. Obviously, she has no class, and that’s why they stuck her with the pathetic excuse for a fae.”

My wolf growled and began forcing herself forward. “I could see why you’d need to trip others and put them down. That’s the only way your fake ass will ever get somewhere.”

The cafeteria became silent as Jordan’s chest heaved each time she took a breath. “You stupid bitch! Don’t make me show everyone how easy it would be to bring you to the brink of death.”

I refused to give her any more ammo or even react to her words. However, I felt a pair of eyes burning into my backside.

“Are you proud of yourself now?” Cole’s voice was cold with an edge to his words.

At first, I thought he was talking to me until I saw his eyes were glued on Jordan.

“It’s best she learns where she is in the pecking order.” Jordan smiled at Cole and licked her bottom lip.

“Which pecking order would that be?” He tilted his head and crossed his arms. “Would it be the biggest bitch or the most manipulative heartless bitch?”

“Are you being serious right now?” The normal golden hue of her eyes seemed to darken. “She’s a fucking newbie, who obviously has issues with her wolf.”

How the hell did she know that? It seemed as if I had my issues plastered on my forehead. “If you want to pick on me, fine, but leave

Jess out of it."

Something flickered in Cole's eyes. "You best leave Ravey alone, or you'll have to answer to me."

Jordan's mouth dropped open, and she kind of looked like a fish out of water the way she was opening and closing it.

"Come on, Jordan." Madison grabbed her arm and tugged her toward the door to leave. "They aren't worth it."

Both girls walked out the cafeteria door, slamming it in their wake.

A big grin spread across Jess's face. "You took her head-on and on your first day."

"Don't encourage her." Cole chuckled and grabbed my arm, pulling me in the direction of Rage and another guy.

"Hey, I want breakfast." Besides, I didn't want to be around Rage, especially now that I knew he's got a girlfriend.

"Don't worry about that." He stopped at a random table and looked at the guy sitting there. "Go get her breakfast. Get her one of everything."

The guy nodded his head and stood.

I glanced at him. "You don't …"

A hand reached around me and covered my mouth. "Ignore her, and bring it to us."

That bastard had some nerve cutting me off. I opened my mouth and bit down on two of his fingers.

"Now, now." Cole chuckled, and his breath hit my ear. "I'm all for that kind of foreplay. I just didn't realize you were one for PDA."

A drop of his blood fell into my mouth. Somehow, the taste was sweeter than chocolate and even more delicious. Surprisingly, I wanted more.

"Damnit." He pulled his hand away and shook his head. "You're going to be the death of me."

Shit. I can't believe that I did that. However, I wasn't going to admit it was an accident in front of him. "Good. Don't ever try to keep me quiet."

A devilish grin crossed his face. "Maybe I like it loud."

Oh, dear God. Did he turn everything into a dirty innuendo? I glanced around and realized that the guy was already putting food on plates for me.

"Come on, Ravey." He tugged on my arm and led me to the table. There was only one extra chair there, and it just had to be between Damien and Cole. Or at least I was assuming that he was the bear shifter.

The guy had some gauze on his shoulders that peeked out from his white polo shirt, and his dark, gray eyes examined me. He was built similar to Rage but looked like an MMA fighter. He ran his fingers

through his short auburn hair.

"Hi, I'm Ra …"

"I know who you are." He held my gaze as he grabbed his orange juice and took a long sip.

Okay, this was going great. I took my seat, which had me directly facing Rage. My body began to betray me, and I held my breath. The last thing I needed was his earthy scent causing me to be even more confused than I already was.

"Do you know how to stay out of trouble?" Rage leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms.

"No, I don't." There was no reason to lie to him. I gained nothing from his dislike.

Cole reached over and put an arm around me, glancing at Damien. "See, she's straight-up honest."

"Yeah, but dangerous." Damien snorted and shook his head. "She doesn't have a hold on her wolf at all."

"You're just pissed because she whooped your ass." Cole pointed at Damien and placed an elbow on the table. "I mean, you really didn't have a chance."

"Shut the fuck up." Damien stood and growled. He grabbed his tray off the table and walked toward the exit. "I'll meet you outside in fifteen. Don't be late."

As he sauntered off, the guy who grabbed my food set down three plates in front of me. I couldn't believe my eyes. He brought me an entire plate of bacon and sausage, another plate of French toast and pancakes, and the last plate had a mound of eggs with cheese. I wasn't sure how I was going to eat one full plate, but there wasn't any way I could let it all go to waste. "Thanks."

"Anytime." The guy smiled and winked at me. "Enjoy."

He was cute with chestnut hair and almond eyes.

"Now scram." Rage waved the guy off, and his charcoal eyes held me in place. "You better eat."

As Jess peeled away from the buffet line, she glanced around for a place to sit.

I figured she was coming to sit with us, but she passed by us, heading to an empty table.

"We have an open seat here." I pointed to the seat that Damien had vacated.

"No, we don't." Rage lifted his feet and placed them in the chair. "Keep going."

That definitely wasn't going to happen. "Yes, we do." I reached over and grabbed the chair, pulling it closer to me and making his feet drop. "Come sit next to me."

"Uh …" Jess bit her bottom lip. She looked at me and then back at

Rage. “I’m going to go over here instead.”

“I’ll go with you.” I stood and reached down, lifting my overflowing tray.

“No, you stay.” Rage’s jaw twitched as he watched. “You’re welcome here. She isn’t.”

The girl from last night entered the cafeteria and headed in our direction. Her forehead was creased, and she scanned me up and down. “Hey, baby.”

Rage ignored her as he kept his eyes locked on me. “I said sit.”

“You heard the man.” Cole’s face had a huge smile on it, and I swore he would’ve been eating popcorn if there was any around.

“Shut up, Cole.” Both Rage and I yelled at him together.

“What’s going on here?” Ashley placed her hand on the seat I’d just vacated.

“Sorry, we’re all full here.” Cole pointed at the chair Rage had his feet on and the vacant one next to him. “This is Ravey’s seat. You heard the man.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.” Ashley took a step back, and her mouth dropped open.

This whole situation was strange, and for some damn reason, I wanted to listen to Rage. However, Jess had been sweet to me and seemed like she could be a good friend. “They are. They were saving this seat for you.” I forced a smile at the hussy and turned to walk away. “Come on, let’s go find another table.”

As we made our way to another table, it was obvious how quiet the other three had become. That was until Cole cleared his throat, and ice laced his voice once more. “How does it feel to be given the seat by a newbie?”

I cringed. Cole was blatantly antagonizing her. I didn’t need another enemy so soon.

“Girl, I can’t believe you.” Jess rushed to an open table and set down her food. “You turned down one of them after you got invited to their table.”

“That’s not a big deal.” I was really uncomfortable with the attention and just wanted to eat.

“No one outside their little tribe has ever been invited to their table. Ashley has sat there only a handful of times, but Rage never requested it.” She took a bite of her French toast that was somehow swimming in syrup. “I’ve never seen Rage act that way.”

Ashley leaned in and was talking to Rage, but his face remained emotionless. Eventually, he stood and took a few steps our way.

“Are you fucking serious right now?” Ashley’s face almost matched her hair color perfectly. Somehow it turned even darker as Rage ignored her. She picked up the tray he had left and slammed it on the

table. “You’re even leaving your fucking trash.”

He stopped when he reached our table, and his eyes locked on me. He turned his head to address Ashley. “If it bothers you that badly, then you throw it away.” His tone was harsh, and he stood rigid in front of me.

“Oh, here, take mine too.” Cole jumped up from the table and saluted me as he exited the room.

Rage pointed to my food and sighed. “Hurry and eat up. Damien will be pissed if you don’t arrive on time.”

“What?” I had assumed he had been talking to him and Cole. “Me?”

“Yes, he’s the one training you today.” He turned on his heels and walked out the door.

“This year might be fun with you here.” Jess giggled and began stuffing her face with food.

She was thinking about having a good year whereas I wasn’t sure I was going to last through the end of the day. This was Damien’s chance to kick my ass after what I did to him last night.

Chapter Nine

All the food that I'd eaten was sitting hard on my stomach. Had I known I was going to be training with Damien, I wouldn't have stuffed myself. At least I hadn't finished that last plate … not completely.

Jess had wanted to go with me outside, but I shooed her on. She didn't need to be late for her training either.

Damien was waiting at the edge of the clearing. He sat on a stone bench and leaned back with his eyes closed, enjoying the faint breeze that ruffled his short hair. He was hot as hell when he wasn't being so guarded.

The breeze blew in the opposite direction, causing him to stiffen and glance in my direction. "It's about time."

He was full of shit, but I wouldn't call him on it. In his defense, I did attack him last night, and he hadn't hurt me. I owed him one.

After a moment, he stood and began walking toward the woods.

If he thought the silent treatment was going to work on me, it wouldn't. I was used to being invisible.

I hurried and followed behind him despite how fast he was going. It was obvious he knew this area. He didn't slow down, so I had to keep pace. I hated to call up my wolf, but now was a time that I needed her.

She sprang forward just enough without forcing the change. When she realized I wasn't going to yank her back, she lent me her vision and agility.

The woods smelled of water and flowers. Even though summer was only a few weeks away, the flowers still smelled as if they had just bloomed.

After several minutes, Damien slowed as a clearing appeared ahead. The grass was longer, and dandelions were scattered throughout. I was a little odd because unlike most people, I firmly believed that they were good omens. I'd let that secret slip to Greg once, and he laughed at me. He had told me that was ridiculous and they were just weeds. However, to me, I associated them with freedom. Usually, they only occurred where most people didn't venture and where I could be myself, unafraid of judgment.

"I was surprised you did that well." His voice caught me off-guard since it'd been a while since he last spoke to me.

If he was looking for a reaction, I wasn't going to oblige him. I stood there, waiting for him to go on. Most people liked to talk. They underrated the power of observation and just keeping their damn

mouths shut. Obviously, he was wanting me to ask what he meant.

It felt a little like we were having a standoff, but I refused to be the one who cracked first.

"Now, I want you to close your eyes. Tell me what you hear and sense." He arched an eyebrow, as if he was daring me to argue.

In all transparency, I wanted to, but I wouldn't back down since that's what he wanted. So instead, I took a deep breath and closed my eyes.

"What do you smell?" His voice was lower and seemed like a challenge.

"I smell the humidity, the flowers, and your scent … pine and cypress." I couldn't believe that I just said that. There was definitely something wrong with my filter.

"Nothing else?" His tone was condescending.

"No, nothing else." I breathed deeply, hoping to discover something new.

"Push yourself." His voice seemed to be getting closer, and he chuckled. "I mean, that is … if you can."

Every time a cocky male acted this way, it made me want to wipe the smug grin off his face. I allowed my wolf to surge forward a little once more. "There is a nest of eggs above me and some squirrels in the tree to my left."

"What made the difference?"

"My wolf surged forward." An honest answer, there was no reason to lie.

"See that's your problem." Damien huffed. "You think of things as you or your wolf. You should be one being, not two separate entities living in the same body. Go ahead, and open your eyes."

I had always felt like my relationship with my wolf was strange, but it was unsettling having someone else point it out.

"We've got to work on your connection. It shouldn't be your human side fighting against your wolf." He ran a hand through his hair and sighed. "So, we're going to practice merging the two."

For the next eight hours, he had me smelling and sensing things around me with my wolf at the forefront in my mind.

AS I ENTERED my dorm room, I noticed Jess was on the couch. She had supernatural anatomy and basic traits books scattered all around her. She glanced at me and grinned. "How did your day go?"

"I'm exhausted." I walked over and dropped into one of the chairs beside her. "Apparently, my wolf isn't fully integrated, so we're working on that."

She reached over and shut one of her books. "I didn't see you at

lunch."

"That's because I didn't have one." I leaned my head back on the seat. "I'm so exhausted."

"Well, I'm about to head out for dinner. Wanna go?" She stood and stretched out her back.

"No, I'll have to pass." I yawned and melted into my chair. "I'm sorry."

"I remember my first day." She smiled at me and opened the door. "I'll bring you back something to eat."

"Thanks." A shower was calling my name.

As the door shut, my phone dinged, alerting me to a text message. I reached down and opened it.

Hey. Call me when u can. I miss you. <3

Great, did I really have it in me to talk to Greg? Either way, I needed to check in with my parents. It had been way too late to call them when it was all said and done last night.

I dialed my parents' number and waited as the line rang. By the second ring, Mom answered. "Raven, is that you?"

"Yeah, who else were you expecting?" They had caller ID. Mom was losing it.

"Sorry, of course, it's you." She let out a sigh and cleared her throat. "We were worried when we didn't hear from you last night. How is everything going?"

"Come on, Liz," Dad spoke from the background. "Put the girl on speaker."

It sounded as if the phone was being shuffled, and then the TV in the background became clearer. "Dad, you there too?"

"Despite your mother's best efforts, I'm here." Dad chuckled, and Mom huffed.

I could picture her rolling her eyes and Dad grinning. "Well, I'm glad."

"Everything okay down there, kiddo?" Dad's voice got clearer as if he had moved closer to the phone.

"Yeah. Sorry I didn't call last night, but it was so intense." I wasn't about to tell them what happened. "I just got through my first day of training, and I'm wiped."

"Well, I'm just happy to hear your voice." Mom sniffled.

"I'm glad to talk to you too." I hadn't even realized how bad I needed to talk to them until now.

"Greg stopped by today," Dad said. "He apologized for his actions and said he felt really bad."

"He texted me earlier." The last thing I wanted to do was call him, let alone talk about him. "I wanted to call you two first."

"That's my baby girl." Pride was evident in Mom's words. "Is

everyone being nice down there?"

If she only knew the truth. "My roommate is great. We seemed to have hit it off."

"That's great." I could hear the smile in Dad's voice. "Is she a shifter?"

"Uh … No, actually she's a fae." I didn't want to give too much information away.

"What?" Mom was shocked. "They intermingle y'all?"

"I don't know about everyone else, but she and I are." I wouldn't have wanted it any other way now. "It's working so far."

"That's good dear," Dad spoke up.

They were acting weird, but I didn't really want to analyze it. Even though it was all mind exercises today, I was completely exhausted both mentally and physically. "Guys, I hate to do this, but I'm exhausted."

"Give us a call in the next couple of days." Dad paused for a moment, and he whispered something to Mom. "We love you."

"I love you both too." I hadn't ever been away from them like this before, so it was new for all of us.

"Be careful, and call us soon." Once Mom finished the words, their line went dead.

The last thing I wanted to do was call Greg, but the longer I put it off, the worse it'd be. I pulled his name from my contacts, and my finger hovered over it. All I wanted to do was go change into my pajamas and lay in bed.

Before I did just that, I pushed his name. The line began to ring, and I hoped that he wouldn't answer. Right on the fourth ring, he picked up. "Hey."

Dammit. I thought I'd be home free. "Hi." I didn't know what to say to him and instantly regretted calling him.

"How are you?" For the first time ever, he sounded awkward and unsure of himself.

"Okay. You?" If he thought I was going to start pouring out my heart or tell him what had been going on here, he was gravely mistaken.

"Not great." A door shut, and there was a shuffling of the phone on his end. "Look, I'm sorry about yesterday."

Had it only been a day? It felt like a whole lot longer now that I thought about it. "You thought they were coming for you."

He chuckled darkly. "I just want you to know that I realized I was acting like an asshole. Maybe I could come down and visit after you get settled. I'd like to see you."

My gut reaction was to tell him 'no,' but he was trying to be sweet. "Maybe, we'll have to see how it goes."

“What are you saying?” His tone hardened.

Great, now he was getting pissy. “I’m saying that it’s a lot different down here, and I don’t know when I’ll get settled.” I didn’t fit in was what I wanted to say, but I wouldn’t be admitting that to him, considering how he was acting.

The distance between us felt more like worlds apart instead of just states.

“How is it?” He seemed interested in what I was saying.

“I don’t know how to explain it.” All the people seemed to be assholes to one another, and no one seemed to like me. I wasn’t sure if Cole’s interest was genuine or not. The only one I felt comfortable with was Jess.

“Well, you could try.” The edge to his tone was back.

The door to our dorm room opened, and Jess came swaying in. Both hands held plates that were piled high with steak, potatoes, and a huge piece of blackberry cobbler. My stomach rumbled in anticipation.

“Girl, get off that phone, and come eat with me.” Jess glided into the kitchen and set the plates on the table.

“Who’s that?” Greg’s voice was sullen and made him sound like he was a toddler.

“My roommate, Jess.” I was ready to get off the phone. “She brought dinner to me, so I’ve gotta go.”

“Oh, will you call me tomorrow?”

“Yeah, sure.” I wanted off the phone and now.

“Love you.”

“Bye.” He always proclaimed his love, but his actions didn’t mirror it. I hung up the phone and walked into the kitchen.

“Who was that?” Jess pulled her plate of food in front of her.

I had to hold back a laugh. There was one large difference between her plate and mine. Her steak was cooked while mine was rare. “Sure you don’t want to eat this one?” I pushed my plate toward her.

“Oh, hell no. I prefer my steak not mooing.” She pointed her fork at mine and wrinkled her nose.

“Aw, then it’s no good.” Not able to withstand it any longer, I grabbed my fork and knife before tearing into it. When I placed the steak in my mouth, I seriously considered whether I’d died and gone to heaven.

For a few minutes, we ate in amicable silence. That was until Jess took a drink of her water and cut another piece off her steak. “How was training with Damien?”

“I’m pretty sure it was his normal.” I finished the piece of food in my mouth and swallowed. “He grunted a lot, told me to do better, and even pushed me and my wolf to bond like a shifter should really be.”

“Everyone is talking about how you’re the first to train with Damien and how the elite Cole seems to have taken an interest in you.” She pushed back from the table and grinned. “For once, people wanted to talk to me instead of their usual shunning.”

If this was them taking a shine to someone, I must not have had a clue how they treated others. “Why do they shun you?”

“It’s partly because I’m fae.” She stared at the table and scowled. “Most of my kind stay in our world, but I wanted something different. I felt different than them, those back home.” She closed her eyes and shook her head. “And because my parents aren’t as rich as theirs and not very powerful.”

“Why does that have anything to do with it?” Her parents weren’t a reflection of her power.

“Most of the kids here were raised by powerful parents.” She stabbed the blackberry cobbler and took a bite. “Their parents came here too, so they’re kind of born into it.”

“So, we’re the outliers then.” It kind of made sense that we didn’t fit in; we weren’t one of them.

“Exactly.” She gave a sad smile and stared at the table. “So, it’s kind of nice having you here. Maybe I finally have an ally.”

I didn’t like trusting people because I was trying to keep my wolf secrets. I did always feel like my relationship with my animal was different than others. It always felt like she was trying to overtake me while others just seemed to blend. It was odd always feeling like an outlier. That somehow you were so different that you didn’t belong in any section of the bell-shaped curve. However, here, they already knew my secret, and it was a little unnerving. “You know, that sounds nice.”

She glanced up and met my eyes. “Really?”

“Girl, if I was trying to keep my distance from you … I’ve been doing a shit job, right?” If I was being truthful with myself, I’d already known that she and I were destined to be friends. I reached across the table with my right hand. “Friends?”

Her eyes sparked, and she grabbed my hand. “Friends.”

“Okay, now that we got that out of the way, I’m going to finish up here and go to bed.” My arms were getting heavy, and I swore my legs felt like they weighed a ton.

“Alright, I’ll leave you to it.” She stood and stretched her back. “I’m going to go take a hot shower.”

That did sound amazing. “Go on, I’m almost done here anyway.”

She grabbed her dish and cup, placing them in the sink before heading to her room.

The blackberry cobbler was to die for. I wasn’t sure if the steak or cobbler was the best. I finished shoveling my food into my mouth and

stood. It seemed that the food gave me a little more energy, and the full moon tugged on me.

I thought maybe a walk by myself would calm me so I could sleep better afterward. I grabbed my keys and locked the door behind me. Within minutes, I was outside underneath the full moon. My wolf whimpered inside of me. She wanted to run. Although, I honestly didn't think I had the strength to change.

I headed in the direction that Damien and I had trained earlier. I bet that would be a good relaxing place to stare at the moon. I took my time strolling through the woods, unlike earlier. Lightning bugs were out and flying around everywhere, their flashes lighting up the woods all around them.

It didn't take long to find the path to the clearing, but I hadn't been prepared to not be alone. There, in the middle of the field, sat someone. An earthy scent filled my nose. My stomach dropped when I realized who it was.

Before Rage could sense me, I turned to make my way back toward the dorms. Still, as soon as I took my first step in retreat, his dark, raspy voice called out. "What are you doing here?"

Shit. He had to be talking to me because there wasn't another person around. I tried to be sneaky and take another step away from him. Instead, he turned around with his eyes locking on me.

Okay, so retreat wasn't an option. Butterflies seemed to take flight in my belly, and my heart rate kicked up. We'd never been alone together before and now we were both out in the woods. I just hoped something bad wasn't going to happen.

Chapter Ten

If I hadn't thought he was gorgeous before, there would be no way I could deny it now. In the moonlight, his chocolate eyes appeared to become black, and he wore a thin t-shirt that somehow defined his muscles even more than before. At the bottom of his sleeve, the edge of a tattoo peeked out.

I wanted to go over there and lift his sleeve higher so I could see the entire pattern. Honestly, pressing my body against him didn't sound so bad either.

"Are you just going to stare at me, or do you plan on answering any time soon?" He scanned his eyes up and down my body.

Damn, I was in over my head. I'd never been this attracted to someone back home. Greg was cute, but no Rage. "I didn't expect anyone to be here."

"Damien brought you here to train earlier." I wasn't sure whether that was a question or statement from him.

"Yes, he did." I had no clue what to say to this guy. He had someone he … No, I refused to let my mind go there. Just the thought made me want to heave.

"Your scent is fucking everywhere." His voice sounded almost pained. "Why aren't you at the dorm or out running?"

"I needed to get away and didn't trust myself to shift." The words were out before I could take them back. Honesty probably wasn't the best policy when it came to him.

He huffed and stood. "Of course you are."

"What is that supposed to mean?" He may treat everyone like this, but it wouldn't work on me.

"Not in tune with your wolf." Even though his hair was short, he ran his fingers through it. "It's driving me crazy."

"It's driving you crazy?" There was no way he could be serious. "I'm so sorry that I'm inconveniencing you." I couldn't help the sarcasm dripping from each word.

"Ugh, that's not what I meant." He blew out a harsh breath.

It was strange because every time I saw Rage, I wasn't sure whether I wanted to jump him or slap him. "Why aren't you out running?"

"I don't trust myself yet." He drew nearer to me, and his eyes landed on my lips.

My tongue darted out, licking them, and I wondered what he would taste like.

"Well, well." Cole's boisterous voice cut through the tension.

“What do we have here?”

Rage jerked away from me like a bad habit. “It’s about time you jackasses finally got here.”

“It sure seemed to me like we interrupted something.” Cole stepped into the clearing with Damien right beside him.

“I was just leaving.” I really didn’t want to deal with them at that moment. I only went for a walk to be alone and clear my head. Not be with Rage and get even more confused.

“No, Ravey.” Cole pouted and headed over, grabbing my hand.

A heavy growl resonated from deep inside Rage as his eyes zoned in on our hands.

“Maybe you should let her go.” Damien placed himself in between Cole and Rage. “Did you invite Ashley to meet us here too?”

Her name was like an instant cold shower. He had someone, and so did I. There wasn’t anything between us, and allowing myself to be weak would only get me hurt.

“No, I’d never bring her here.” Rage flinched backward, increasing the distance between us.

There was an awkward silence that descended around us. “I needed to get out for a while and probably should be heading back. Jess will be worried about me.”

“You do need your rest.” It felt like Damien was really inspecting me. “You had a hard day today. Tomorrow, you’ll attend the supernatural cultures class, so you’ll get a day's break.”

“That class is horrible but interesting.” Cole seemed to glow in the moonlight. “But it’s important stuff. Do you need me to walk you home?”

“I’m fine, but thanks.” I wanted to get away—escape. “Have fun tonight.” I wanted to add ‘not too much fun,’ but I bit my tongue.

I glanced at Rage one last time and made myself turn away. Staying here would only make things worse.

AS I ENTERED the cafeteria with Jess the next morning, my appetite just about vanished when I saw Ashley sitting with the guys. From what it had sounded like, she didn’t get to do that regularly, so it took me by surprise.

Her hair was piled in a messy bun with strands cascading around her face. She was leaning into Rage with a huge smile on her face, but the guys were sitting there, barely speaking a word to one another.

“Why is she sitting with them?” Jess frowned and slowed her pace.

“No clue.” I didn’t want to talk about it. Although, the more I saw her practically sitting in Rage’s lap, the more I wanted to puke or throw a tantrum. Even though I had no claim on him.

Forcing myself to remain calm, I grabbed a plate and began piling on the food. There were eggs, bacon, Belgian waffles, and all kinds of fruit. I thought maybe I could eat away my feelings.

Jess remained quiet as she fixed her plate too, and we finished around the same time.

There was a vacant table on the other side of the cafeteria from the guys, so I nodded in that direction. “Let’s sit there.”

“But Cole is waving at you.” Jess’s forehead creased, but she followed me as I walked over to the table.

“I don’t really care.” That was partly true, so I wasn’t lying. I couldn’t be over there, not with Ashley and Rage. I didn’t need any other people seeming to target me. I already had the vampire princess pissed. At this very moment, Jordan was staring at me with pure hatred.

Even though my appetite was still gone, I grabbed my fork and shoveled a large amount of eggs on it. There was no telling what might happen today, so I needed to fuel up.

“I’m sorry about Rage.” Jess dropped her voice, and she frowned.

Oh, hell no. “There isn’t anything to be sorry about.” I took a bite of eggs, but that didn’t prevent me from talking. “He’s an ass, and they are a match made in heaven. It doesn’t phase me. Anyway, I have a boyfriend.”

“You haven’t dumped that loser yet?” Cole rolled his eyes and dropped into one of the vacant seats between Jess and me.

“We’ve been together since we were sixteen.” I lifted my fork with another pile of eggs on it and ate the large bite. “It’s not like three days were going to change that.”

“It’s kind of hard to believe that you’ve only been here three days.” Cole wiggled his eyebrows. “You’ve already got two sets of enemies. Not to mention messing around with one of my best friends. You’re the missing link I’ve been searching for.”

“First off, I’m not messing around with anyone.” Why did everyone think Rage and I had something between us? We didn’t. It was just mutual dislike. “Secondly, the reason why I have one set of enemies is sitting right here.” I pointed at him sitting at our table.

Cole placed his elbows on the table and propped his head in his hands. “Oh, please. Tell me more.”

“You’re such an ass.” I grabbed a piece of bacon and twirled it around like it was a weapon. “Learn some manners.” I crammed the whole piece in my mouth.

“You know, you’re right.” Smirking, he leaned back in his seat and pointed to me. “Obviously, I should be learning etiquette from you.”

Jess exploded into giggles until I glared at her, and then she mashed her lips together. “I’m sorry, but he’s kind of on-point right

now … with you."

"Traitor." I grabbed a napkin and wiped the grease from my fingers. "Who is my second set of enemies?"

"Ashley." A smirk crossed his face. "What are you going to do about it?"

"Why in the world would she be mad at me?" I haven't done anything for her to be upset. Sure, Rage was hot, but it wasn't like I was publicly acknowledging it.

"Because Rage has taken more notice of you than he ever has of her." He turned his body around and tilted his head toward their table.

There sat Ashley talking to Rage, but he was glancing off in another direction, not even pretending to pay attention.

"Can you stop talking?" Damien grumbled, but the words were clear to everyone in the cafeteria.

"What?" Ashley flinched at the words, and her mouth dropped open.

"Do you not understand English?" Damien stood, and the cafeteria silenced. "I said shut the fuck up."

"You can't talk to me like that." Ashley glanced at Rage and grabbed his arm. "Tell him."

He yanked his arm out of her grasp. "I'm not telling him shit. I agree." He lifted his head and scowled. "You're just over here blabbing, and we don't want to hear it."

"Are you being serious right now?" Her voice turned into a shriek, and her hands began to shake. "You asked me to sit here."

"No, actually, I didn't." He stood and crossed his arms. "You sat down, and I didn't even want to waste the energy to tell you to leave. Don't make it out to be something more than it is."

"That's bull shit, and you know it." Ashley's gaze landed squarely on me.

"Oh … now, this is going to be fun." Cole winked at me and turned back to focus his attention on her. "You miss me, eh?"

"I wasn't even looking at you." Her face began to turn a shade of red. I wasn't sure if it was from anger or embarrassment. Maybe it was safe to say it was the combination of both.

"It's okay to admit it." He acted as if he was flipping his hair over his shoulder. "I'm pretty hot."

"This isn't some type of game, Cole." She pointed her finger in my direction. "That bitch hasn't even been here a week, and she's already screwing shit up."

"What exactly is she screwing up?" Jess's violet eyes glowed, and she glared at Ashley.

I couldn't believe that both Jess and Cole were standing up for me.

“They’ve all been different since she’s gotten here.” She stomped her foot and clenched her hands. “She needs to crawl back into whatever hole she crawled out of.”

“So, you’re saying Rage has been acting indifferent to you?” There was a challenge in Cole’s eyes.

“Yes, and she’s the only variable that changed.” She shook her head, causing her hair to bounce behind her.

“Is that how you’re justifying it in your head?” Cole’s dark laugh seemed to echo across the cafeteria.

“Let me make it clear. Obviously, I’ve needed to do this for a while.” Rage grabbed her arm and pulled her hard toward him.

Her breathing increased, and a small smile spread across her face. “Yeah, baby?”

This was going to be bad. I wasn’t sure why she was smiling, but I had a feeling he was about to pull the rug out from under her.

“First off, don’t ‘baby’ me.” His eyes were now slits, and there was a tick in his jaw. “You’re nothing to me.”

“What?” She took a deep breath and shook her head no. “That’s not true.”

“Yes, it is.” He let her go and took several large steps away so he was next to Damien, who had been silent the entire time. He quieted his voice so only the table could hear. “You were just a distraction and nothing more. I told you from the very beginning that you were a mere distraction; just a way for me to pass time.”

“But it changed.” Tears welled in her eyes, and it sounded as if she was begging.

A part of me felt bad for her, but these guys didn’t seem to put on charades. She should’ve known what she was getting into.

“No, I allowed you to think it was something.” He chuckled, and a smirk spread across his face. He whispered, “But now I need to fix my mistake. You were always a distraction. You will always be just another notch in my belt.”

“You asshole!” She spun away from him, and her eyes met mine. “You’ll pay for this.”

Right when I was beginning to feel bad for her, she had to go and do that.

“Misplaced blame is only for the ignorant.” The words came out before I could stop them. “So, I’m not surprised by your words.”

Cole began laughing hard and placed an arm around my shoulders. “God, I love you.”

“This isn’t over.” Ashley’s face was the same color as a tomato, and a tear ran down her cheek, leaving a wet trail behind.

“Come on, Ashley.” Jordan and Madison appeared beside her. “Let’s get you away from this slut and her fairy trash.”

“I’m not a fairy.” Jess wiggled her fingers, and the water from both her and my cups jumped out, splashing all over the three girls. They were now standing there with their clothes dripping wet and in a puddle.

“Both of you are going to pay for this.” Jordan marched to the cafeteria door and held it open as the other two girls ran through.

“That was epic.” Cole chuckled and dropped his arm. “Jess, we may have underrated you.”

“It’s just nice to have a friend.” She focused on me with a smile.

“Ravey, things sure are getting interesting with you around.” Cole bumped his shoulder into mine.

“I’m sorry about that,” Rage said as he and Damien reached our table.

“You don’t need to apologize to me.” Cole smiled, placing a hand on his chest where his heart should have been beating. “But thank you for your kind words and concern for my well-being.”

“You’re such an idiot sometimes.” Damien punched Cole in the arm.

“Now that’s not a way to get into my pants.” Cole tsked and rubbed his arm.

“Good, I’m trying to do everything possible to not get in there.” Damien glanced at his watch and began moving away. “Remember, Raven, we’ll be continuing our training sessions every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday until you get a handle on things.”

Like I could have forgotten that, but at that moment, my priority was getting away from Rage. “I don’t even know where my classroom is, so I better get going.”

“I’m sure someone here would love to help you.” Cole’s smile seemed to fill his whole face.

“Yeah, Jess said she would help me earlier.” So that was a lie, but this was a serious test of our friendship. If she didn’t get the hint, I could very possibly wind up killing her.

“Can’t let my girl get lost.” Jess stood and waited on me. “Let’s go so we both aren’t late.”

Not needing any additional encouragement, I stood and rushed to the trash bins. I didn’t even bother saying ‘Bye’ to any of the guys. For now, I had to get distance from them even though a part of me didn’t want to go. It had everything to do with Rage, and that wasn’t cool. My whole life, I had never wanted a guy to have that much influence on me. I wanted to be my own person, whoever that was. At the moment though, the wolf part of me was ecstatic about the scene that had just gone down. I had to keep my head on straight. I didn’t need enemies and didn’t need to be a target. Not even a week here, and I already had two sets of people that hated my guts. I didn’t need to be

anyone else's target. I needed to lay low and hopefully keep my wolf in check. It was going to be an even bigger struggle since they wanted me to let her free and become more of a part of me.

Chapter Eleven

As I entered the classroom, I was surprised to see how many other students were inside. There were eleven other kids already seated. For some reason, I figured that I would be the only one there, but in hindsight, I realized that didn't make sense.

There were three rows of desks, and the back of the room was already filled. There was only a desk in the front middle section that was vacant. I guessed that one would be mine.

I headed in that direction when one of the kids stuck out her foot, trying to trip me. Luckily, I managed to dodge it but at the amusement of over half the class.

The girl leaned over, her sickening sweet smell hitting my nose. "That's what you get for bothering Jordan."

Of course, she was a vampire. Even if she didn't smell like one, her pale skin and sharp features would have alerted me. Not wanting to cause even more problems, I ignored her and sat in the open seat, which happened to be right next to her. My first class was already starting out great.

"Why don't you go back home and relieve us from all our misery?" The girl on the other side of me frowned and leaned away from me.

That one burned a little. She was another wolf shifter like me, and she was acting that way. Out of everyone here, I thought she'd be a little nicer to me. I forced myself to look forward and remain emotionless.

Thankfully, an older man, who had to be in his early to mid-forties, entered the room. He wore all black, and his dark hair was trimmed short. He smelled of herbs and lavender. "Is there a problem here?"

No one in the room answered.

His gaze landed on me, and he tilted his head. "You must be Raven." He strolled to the middle of the room and gazed around. "Did anyone bother you, Miss Wright?"

Yeah, I wasn't going to be falling for this. If I ratted out anyone, it would just get worse for me. "No, not at all."

He arched an eyebrow and glanced at each student, one by one. "Anyone else have a different answer?"

Once again, the room remained silent. After a few seconds, the man sighed and nodded his head. "Very well." He walked over to me and smiled. "Miss Wright, I'm so happy that you are joining our class. I'm Professor Shaw and will be your teacher." His gaze landed straight on my necklace. "Fortunately, this class just started last week, so you

haven't missed much. This is one class that begins each summer and ends when I feel like each person is ready to move on to the next level."

At least, I hadn't missed too much. Any small victory was a big win for me at this point.

"Now, let's jump right into it." He turned and wrote 'vampires' on the whiteboard in black. "One of the most important things every good leader knows is how each supernatural race's beliefs, customs, and leadership hierarchy influence their kind and decisions."

"This is finally a topic I can agree with." The girl who tried to trip me smiled and leaned back in her seat, crossing her legs.

"I'm sure you do." Professor Shaw laughed and pointed the pen at her. "So, start us off. What's your belief?"

"That blood and power are everything." She glanced at me and smirked. "And we take care of our own."

"Yes, blood and power are almost interchangeable." He wrote the words blood and power on the board before turning back around. "For vampires, this is both their weakness and strength. At times, their thirst for the blood of someone can become an obsession. Something they can't quite control."

"Hey now." The girl pouted and crossed her arms.

"Oh, come on now. That's been proven over and over throughout history." He paced in front of the room. "For example, the legend of Count Dracula. He came to an end because of his cravings and urges. However, real vampires can reproduce and rarely turn someone into one of them. They can control their venom. The only thing the legend had right was that their heart doesn't beat, which makes them immortal."

Wow, this guy was super passionate about these facts. Maybe this wouldn't be such a bad class after all.

"ALL RIGHT." He glanced at the clock and smiled. "Sorry for holding you over, but this is exciting information."

The class had been truly interesting and insightful. It was amazing how the teacher was able to break down the core characteristics of each supernatural race.

Everyone grabbed their stuff and headed out of the room without even a backward glance. However, the vampire girl hissed at me before disappearing.

"So, what did you think of the class?" Professor Shaw erased the board and dusted off his hands.

"It was truly interesting." I stood from my desk and stretched out my back.

“I’m glad. Students either love the class or hate it.” He shrugged and turned around.

“Well, it is a little concerning knowing everyone is learning about your strengths and weaknesses. Sometimes those secrets are best kept hidden though.” I understood why this information was needed, but it could help others get a strategic advantage over your kind.

“Any good leader already knows this information whether through this class or learning on their own.” He adjusted his shirt and smiled. “It’s what this university is supposed to do. Generate the future leaders of our races.”

“I think each of us will learn a lot.” A whiff of cotton candy floated into the room.

“Hey, teach. How’s our girl doing?” Cole swaggered in and wrapped an arm around my shoulders.

“Your girl?” The professor had a strange look on his face as he pulled back, taking in what was happening right in front of him.

“Yup, I was the recruit who brought her in.” He tugged me further into his side. “So I guess I’m responsible for her now.”

“You do realize that you’ve recruited several hundred others for us.” The professor waved his hands side to side. “And you’ve never done this before.”

“Don’t be jealous.” He placed a hand on his chest. “I still have room here for you too.”

It was official. Cole had no boundaries at all.

“Aw. Thank you, Mr. Smith.” He rubbed a hand down his face. “You’ve eased all my concerns. Now, Miss Wright, if you need any help getting caught up, please let me know. We hadn’t really gotten into any of the details prior to today. It was more about why you needed this information and what to do with it. So, please, come to me if needed. I have an open-door policy.”

“Now, don’t be trying to steal her from me.” Cole dropped his hand from my shoulders and gently grabbed my arm. “If she needs any extra help, I’m more than willing to give it to her … if you know what I mean.”

Oh my God. I may have died of embarrassment right then if I hadn’t already. “I have a boyfriend, and it’s not him.”

“That’s good to know.” He tsked and pointed his finger at Cole. “You’re making her uncomfortable, and I don’t blame her either. Rest assured Ms. Wright; I already know that Mr. Smith is quite full of it, so don’t worry.”

“Aw, Ravey’s face is red.” Cole tapped me on my nose. “Somehow that makes you even more adorable. This may have to become a regular occurrence.”

“Please, don’t.” I’m pretty sure he would try to top himself next

time, and there was no telling how far he would go. “I’m not sure I could survive it.”

“I think it’s time both of you go and grab some dinner.” The professor glanced at me and motioned Cole to the door. “I would tell you to stop embarrassing her, Mr. Smith, but I think that might only encourage you more.”

“Challenge accepted.” He lifted both hands and pretended to shoot Professor Shaw.

“He didn’t even challenge you.” That was the point of the professor’s whole spiel.

“Oh, he did.” Cole tugged me to the door. “It’s the fact that he didn’t challenge me that made it a challenge.”

“Do you even listen to yourself sometimes?” Cole must live in a different world than the rest of us. That was the only answer.

“Sweet Miss Wright, I think the problem is that he listens to himself way more than he should.” The professor shrugged and once again glanced at my necklace.

At least I’m hoping that he was eyeing my necklace and not my boobs. That would be even more disconcerting.

Cole dragged me out of the classroom and into the hall. “How did your first day with Professor Shaw go?”

“It was really interesting.” For once, I didn’t have to lie about a class. “I knew the basics about the other supernaturals, but we weren’t around them. Somehow we had isolated ourselves. Still, learning more about all the strengths and weaknesses, it’s interesting. Although it’s also …”

“Unnerving?” Cole guided me through the crowded halls, ignoring all the people who stared at me.

“Yes, that’s the word I was looking for.” It was surprising that he got it. He was always cutting jokes, so I wasn’t entirely sure he’d understand.

He opened a glass door that led outside, and when we stepped through, his shoulders sagged. “There is good in that class, but it’s still relatively new.” He ran his hands through his hair, causing the spikes to be messy. “It’s something the Professor had been trying for years to push through, and the headmaster finally approved it just this past semester.”

“Really?” At least this confirmed what I had initially thought. It was one thing to know about the other races, but to lay out each strength and weakness in front of everyone didn’t completely sit well with me. However, if we were the next set of leaders coming through, it would be good to know just for the sake of interaction and respect.

“There is a benefit to knowing, but having each race dissected like that may not be the best idea.” He glanced off into the woods and

frowned. “This is his pilot class that you’re in.”

“Thanks for telling me.” Now my concerns were amplified. Cole must have been more concerned than I was, considering the way he was acting. All traces of the strong, inappropriate vampire I’d come to know were gone.

“Still, for it to bother you as a newbie, it proves my concerns aren’t one-sided.” A door opened and shut, and footsteps headed in our direction. Cole’s eyes narrowed, and he stood close to me.

Great. Jordan’s dark hair almost blended into the black tight shirt she wore, and her lips were painted a blood red. “Am I interrupting something?”

“No, not at all.” Cole reached out his arm behind me, propping himself up on a tree. “We were discussing bitches, so it must have summoned one. I’m not surprised it was you who got the call.”

She stopped and balled her hands at her sides. “What did I ever do to you?”

“Breathe.” His tone grew colder somehow. “You’re wasting a precious commodity.”

Before I could help it, a giggle escaped me.

“Aw, your little pet thinks it okay for her to make a noise.” She opened her mouth, and her fangs extended. “Maybe I should teach her a lesson. After all, dogs were made to die.”

“Watch it, Jordan.” Cole smirked and leaned closer to me. “Your jealousy is beginning to show.”

“Once upon a time, I might have thought you were the best catch around.” She crossed her arms right under her breasts, emphasizing them. “But not anymore. How could you befriend someone like her?”

“Because unlike you, he knows that I’m only a bitch to those who are deserving.” I’d never disliked someone as much as her. I thought I hated Sheila before, but at that moment, I could see that Sheila wasn’t even close to being an eighth annoying as Jordan was.

Jordan cringed at my words, and her body stiffened. “Did I give you permission to speak to me?”

“Count yourself lucky that the two of us are giving you the time of day.” Cole glanced toward the woods and smiled. “Maybe that’s the lesson you need. You get your thrills from feeling in charge. What would happen if no one talked to you?”

“You aren’t God, Cole.” She lifted her chin, but there was fear in her eyes. “There is no way you could make that happen.”

“That’s bullshit, and you know it.” Cole stood straight and advanced on her. Each step toward her, she backed up another step. “You mess with Raven one more time, and I’ll make that happen. Is that what you want?”

Her bottom lip quivered, and her eyes landed on me with even

more hatred than before. “You better watch your back.” She turned around and hurried back into the building, slamming the door behind her.

Damien’s pine smell hit my nose.

“Did you really have to do that?” Damien stepped from the woods and shook his head.

“Please tell him that she approached us.” Cole stuck his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

“He’s telling the truth.” I had to protect Cole. He’d done it enough for me. “She wanted the altercation.”

“She won’t let it go.” A side of Damien’s lips lifted. “She’s like a dog with a bone.”

“What? Did you just compare her to a dog?” Cole glanced around and pouted. “Damnit, there was no one here to witness that.”

“That’s enough, Cole.” Damien frowned and rubbed his eyes. “The more you keep antagonizing, the more people are going to go after her.”

I couldn’t believe that Damien was worried about my well-being. He was so quiet and standoffish.

“Aw, you care for her too.” Cole arched an eyebrow.

“No, but for some reason, I’ve teamed up with you and Rage.” Damien stepped toward me and seemed to be examining me. “I’m not sure why, but you both care about her. So, if you really care, stop antagonizing people.”

If that didn’t make it clear how he felt about me, I wasn’t sure what else would. I was obviously a nuisance, and he was doing this just for his friends. Still, Damien was right. For whatever reason, Cole was determined we’d be friends. So how exactly was I going to fit in here?

Chapter Twelve

The last six months had been crazy, to say the least. Luckily, we got into a pattern. Rage still avoided me like the plague, and Cole put some distance between us, at least from what everyone else saw. Of course, Greg called and texted me every day.

Jordan and her crew seemed to settle down when Cole stopped publicly hanging around me. All of them still hated me, but her blatant attempts to make my life hell had reduced drastically.

My biggest concern was that I still wasn't able to fully connect with my wolf. Damien was getting frustrated with me, and to be honest, so was I. It was like there was some kind of barrier. Damien had told Cole to stop hanging around because I had no way to protect myself yet.

Christmas was already upon us. Still, I wasn't allowed to go home because of my issues. After what I had done to Damien, they were afraid that it could happen again. For some reason, Damien wanted to stay here and help me gain control. The break gave us another two weeks of training with no interference from anyone else.

Everyone was getting ready to head home, but there was a dance tonight for the students and staff.

Something was being dragged across the den floor, and I jumped out of bed to see what was going on. When I entered the den, I found Jess with an oversized suitcase with clothes sticking out the sides. She was attempting to tug it to the door, but the suitcase probably weighed more than she did.

"Do you need some help?" I couldn't help the grin that spread across my face.

"Hmmph, no." She tugged on it once more, but it didn't even budge an inch. "Fine, but I don't want any gloating to happen."

"No promises." I couldn't help digging at her. She normally never needed help so this was a rare opportunity.

"Hey now." When she saw the look on my face, she sighed. "Girl, don't play me like that."

"You know I love you too much to follow through." I walked over and grabbed the luggage. It was even hard for me to carry. "What the hell do you have in here?"

"Well, my clothes here are nicer than the ones at home." She cringed and shrugged. "So maybe … uh, over half my closet."

"How did they all fit in here?" Our closets were pretty full, and most of them were our standard button-down shirts and skirts.

"I might've used some of my magic." She shrugged. "It's no big

deal."

"Are you leaving already?" My stomach dropped. I'd assumed she and I would go to the dance together.

"Of course not." She reached over and swatted my arm. "I just know it'll be hard for me to get out of bed in the morning. My parents are coming bright and early to take me back home."

"Your parents are coming?" She hadn't told me that little nugget of information before now.

"Yeah, didn't I tell you?" She tapped her finger to her lips. "Oh, wait. I was going to, and then Damien pulled you away for training. Oops." She cringed and then smiled at me. "Hey Raven, my parents want to meet you so they are picking me up."

"Thanks for the heads up." It wasn't a big deal at all, but I had to tease her a little more. "So, I guess I shouldn't go to bed naked tonight."

"If you want to make a lasting impression, sure." She shrugged and fell back onto the couch. "I won't judge."

"There goes my confidence in you telling me if something is a bad idea." It was crazy how close we'd become in this short amount of time. I figured living with someone inadvertently did that.

"Speaking of which, we need to go dress shopping." She crossed her legs and picked at her nails. "We should've already done this."

"How are we going to get off campus?" Neither one of us had a car, so I'd planned on rolling in with just jeans and a shirt.

"Did you really just ask me that?" She jumped to her feet and hurried down the hallway to my room.

"What are you doing?" If she was hoping for some cute dresses in there, she was going to be sadly mistaken.

She walked into my room and was back out within seconds with my cell phone in her hands. "I'm taking this emergency into my own hands." She swiped my phone, entering the correct design to gain access to contacts.

"How do you know my password?" I'd never given it to her before.

"Oh, come on." She rolled her eyes as she operated my phone. "It's a freaking square. Do you know how boring that is?"

"No, but I'm pretty sure you just told me." That had me worried about how many others knew it. I was going to have to change it before she did some kind of spell on it where it couldn't be changed.

"That's what friends do." She typed something into the phone and then tossed it to me. "There, problem solved."

I glanced at the phone and saw what she'd texted.

Hey Cole - I need a trip to town.

"Really?" I was never going to hear the end of it.

"Oh, come on." She placed her hand on her hip. "You love him."

“He’s like a fungus.” The more I asked him for stuff, the more I knew I’d never live it down. “He takes hold and won’t leave.”

“I’m so telling him you said that.” Jess laughed and moved past me.

The phone buzzed in my hand.

Ohhh! Are we buying lingerie? I’d be more than happy to let you know which outfit works best. Meet me at my car in ten.

Of course, that would be his response. “We’ve got to meet him in ten. You better get ready.” I slammed my door and rushed, throwing on a pair of jeans and a t-shirt. Even though it was late December, it wasn’t super cold here, so my wolf alone kept me warm.

I raced into the bathroom and grabbed the toothbrush rather than my hairbrush. I quickly applied some lip stain and mascara. Thankfully, it didn’t take me long, I headed into the den.

“What took you so long?” Jess was pacing back and forth. “I was ready to go before.”

“Girl, it’s only been like five minutes.” I wasn’t sure if I was up to handling both her and Cole this morning. Hell, I hadn’t even had a cup of coffee yet. I slipped on my tennis shoes and grabbed my purse. “Let’s go.”

“It’s about damn time.” Jess swung open the door and rushed to the elevator.

I wasn’t sure what the hell I was getting into. I glanced at my phone again and cringed. It had just turned nine, and they were already dragging me to go shopping.

Within minutes, we were out the door and heading to the parking lot. Since it was a Saturday morning and right before the dance, we had been blessed to have a day off to rest and relax. Obviously, I wouldn’t be partaking in any of that.

“Damn, do you know which car is his?” Jess glanced around the rather small parking lot.

Cole appeared in front of us and waved us toward him.

“How the hell did he get here so fast?” He was nowhere in sight, and then within a blink of an eye, he stood right in front of us.

“He’s a vampire.” She didn’t even bother glancing in my direction. She was on a mission. “That’s one of their things.”

Of course I knew that, but Cole had never used that skill on me.

As we approached him, his blue eyes seemed to sparkle in the sun. “So, I’m thinking we’d start with Victoria’s Secret. I mean, yes, it’s like the staple guy thing to say, but I’m open to other places after we leave there.”

“When did Victoria’s Secret begin selling dresses?” Jess paused and grabbed her phone.

“Dresses. Okay.” He nodded and glanced off into the distance.

“Sure, that would be classier, but you’d need a lot of lace or leather.”

“Leather does sound sexy.” She nodded as she kept swiping on her phone.

“We aren’t going to Victoria’s Secret.” I needed a damn cup of coffee and pronto. “First we’re going to Starbucks and then to a store that sells dresses. Apparently, I need a dress for the shindig tonight.”

“Shindig?” Jess stopped paying attention to her phone and looked at me. “What’s that?”

“But you’d still need new underwear for underneath.” Cole nodded at me with a very serious expression on his face.

“The shindig of which she speaks is the dance.” Rage walked up to us from behind. “And no, no new underwear.” His earthy scent hit me a little too late since he’d already made his presence known.

“Oh, come on.” Cole pouted and raised both hands. “Every girl has to have new underwear for a dance.”

“Who the hell told you that?” Sometimes I worried about him and his ideas.

“Common knowledge.” Cole huffed and pulled out his keys.

“No, this girl right here is fine with her underwear. I just need a dress.” There was no way I’d be modeling anything ever for Cole.

“New underwear wouldn’t hurt though.” Jess smashed her lips together, trying to keep from grinning.

“No.” It had been a nice friendship while it lasted. “It’s not happening. Or if it does, that’s just between you and Cole.” At this point, I was wanting to march back into the dorm and crawl back into bed. I wasn’t sure I could take a full day with these two ding-a-lings. “Please, for the love of God, I need coffee, stat.”

Rage grabbed the keys from Cole’s hands and headed to the car. “Now that’s the best idea I’ve heard in the last five minutes.” He hurried over, opened the front passenger door, and held it open. “Let’s get moving. If those two want to join, they’ll jump in.”

This was the closest I’d been to him for a while, and his scent made my head a little dizzy. “Thanks.” I wasn’t sure how the word got out of my mouth, but it did even if it was a little breathy.

I slid into the seat, and he shut the door. He didn’t skip a beat as he walked past Cole and Jess.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Cole followed behind, but it was too late. Rage had already opened the driver door, got behind the wheel, and even locked his door behind himself.

“Dude, this is my car.” Cole reached to open the door, but it wouldn’t budge.

“If you want to go, get in the back seat.” Rage motioned behind him.

“Hell, no. This is my fucking car.” He narrowed his eyes and

extended his fangs.

"What the hell?" Every nerve in my body was on end.

"Don't worry." Rage whispered as he grabbed the gear stick and put it in reverse. "He'll get in and get over it fast too."

"So you've done this before?" It surprised me that this might be a common occurrence.

"Nope, but I was trying to make you feel better." He grinned at me, and my body reacted inappropriately.

The door behind me opened, and Jess climbed in. "You guys aren't going anywhere, not without me."

"I sure hope so since you were the one who got me up this damn early." I could've been in bed sleeping, but Jess had ruined that.

Cole jerked the back driver's side door open and got in. "Not cool."

"Sorry, man, but if you drove, we'd be heading straight to Victoria's Secret or some other specialty store. I don't think I could handle that today." Rage turned on the A/C, blasting it.

Those words and the A/C were like a cold shower to me. I didn't know why, but I thought he might be having a hard time fighting his feelings for me just like I was for him. Still, if both of us fighting our attraction didn't make it clear, I wasn't sure what else could.

"Well, you could be right." Cole leaned forward and winked at me. "I mean, hot girls with barely anything on. If that's not a good start to the day, I'm not sure what else would be."

"Can you please just drop this?" If I had to hear the words underwear one more time, I might have spontaneously combusted.

We hit the main road heading into town. Everyone in the car was in complete silence until my eyes landed on the Starbucks logo, and I groaned. "Thank God."

Cole cleared his throat. "Whatcha doin' up there, Ravey? Do we need a hand check?" He leaned between the seats, scanning me over.

"What the hell are you doing?" I reached over and smacked him on top of the head.

"It just sounded like you might be pleas …"

"Shut the hell up, Cole." Rage clutched his fingers on the steering wheel and shook his head. "She just saw a Starbucks."

"I'm just saying, this has been probably the best morning of my entire life." Jess giggled in the backseat.

When Rage pulled into the parking lot, I got out and stretched my legs. Cole was a handful, so I probably needed a double shot of something in order to get through the day.

Jess and Cole headed straight into Starbucks, but I needed a moment to myself.

"What's your usual?" Rage stepped up to me and scanned me over.

He always gave me mixed signals. One second, I'd think he was

attracted to me, and in the next, he didn't seem interested at all. It shouldn't matter. After all, I still had Greg, but a part of me knew that relationship wouldn't amount to anything. "A venti non-fat blonde vanilla latte."

His indifferent face morphed into one of pure confusion. "Okay, wasn't expecting that at all. I was expecting mocha or regular coffee. Not whatever it is you just said."

"Hey, don't shade me." I stuck my tongue out at him. "I just know what I like."

"I wished that was true." The words were so low I thought I'd dreamed them. He nodded to the door. "You ready?"

"Go on without me." At least he seemed to not hate my guts. "I need another moment of peace before I head into that."

"Yeah, he's a handful." A genuine smile crossed his face. "At least Jess seems to hold her own."

Damn, I was in trouble. That unguarded smile might have been my undoing. "That she can." Thankfully some coherent words made it through, so I wasn't just awkwardly gawking at him.

"Alright, let me go brave the vampire." He winked at me and walked across the parking lot.

I was completely at his mercy as I watched his ass the entire way to the building. Damn, I had to get myself together. My phone dinged, alerting me to a text message. When I saw Greg's name, I felt really guilty even though I hadn't done anything.

Hey babe, I hope to see you soon. <3

It had been over six months since we last saw each other, and the way we had left things wasn't the best. At this point, I knew what I had to do, but damn, I wanted to do it in person. He at least deserved that, but not letting me go home over the holidays took me by surprise. However, Damien offered to stay back and work with me. He had said something about his parents doing Christmas overseas without him.

"You were the one hollering for coffee, and you're still standing out here?" Jess took a sip of her coffee and waited for me by the door. "Get your ass in here already. We have to make sure we have ample time for dress shopping."

My chance at killing some time had just ended. "They don't open until ten. We still have," I said as I glanced at my watch, "thirty minutes."

"By the time you get in line and we get out of here, it'll be perfect timing." Her cheeks were flushed, and the wind blew her hair to the side.

"Alright, let's do this." I opened the door and went to join the line.

"Hey, come here." Rage motioned for me. "You don't need to stand

in that line."

"Uh, yeah, I do." It was just like a man to forget who wanted to come here in the first place. "If you want to come out of this whole thing alive, I'd recommend you wait for me to get something."

"What if I want to be naughty?" Cole lifted the car keys and jiggled them.

Rage smacked Cole's hand, causing the keys to fall to the ground. "Just ignore him. I already ordered yours, so you're good to go."

My heart warmed at his words. What was going on with me? "Thanks, you didn't have to do that." The last time we'd talked, it had been right before Ashley went berserk in the cafeteria. It was tense, to say the least, so him being considerate was doing things to me that it really shouldn't have. He was a freaking player, so I had to keep my head on straight.

Jess nudged me in the side. "He got yours."

"You know he can hear you, right?" She's a supernatural and should know that shifters have amazing hearing.

"You know I don't care, right?" She elbowed me again and snickered. "Just sayin' he didn't get mine."

I gave her my best death glare, but she only dissolved into giggles.

"Blonde nonfat vanilla latte for Raven." The barista placed the drink on the table and went back to work.

"What the hell is that?" Cole advanced slowly toward the cup. "When you ordered it, I thought you were talking about Jess."

"Why in the hell would I be ordering for Jess?" Rage rubbed a hand down his face. "You know what. I don't want to know. Forget I asked."

"I'm glad you asked the question." Cole pointed at Rage and then rubbed his chin. "Because I thought that was a more plausible explanation instead of it being a fucking frou-frou coffee drink."

A few younger girls sitting at a table nearby giggled, checking both of the guys out. My wolf wanted to come unhinged.

"First off, thank you." I grabbed my drink from the table and headed to the door. "Now, let's go. We've already been everyone's daily entertainment."

Jess followed right on my heels, and when we stepped outside, she touched my arm. "Girl, I'm only having fun, but you need to be careful with Rage. Granted, he never treated Ashley like this. Still, don't give away your milk for free. Make him buy the whole damn cow."

If this was any indication of how my day would keep going, I definitely needed to go back to my room and crawl into bed. I had a vampire that was inappropriate as hell, a player that was making my insides turn to mush, and a fae giving me dairy quotes about sex. I

hoped there was only one way up from here.

Chapter Thirteen

My only salvation was my bougie coffee drink that everyone made fun of. I blocked out all the ramblings as I sat behind Cole and next to Jess. I was relieved that I got a little bit of distance from Rage, but the way Cole was driving made me regret it. I think we ran at least three red lights and blew through two stop signs. I'd never been honked at this many times in my whole life. "I don't remember you driving like this before."

"Well, you were already going through a lot that day, so I behaved." Cole glanced at me through the rearview mirror. "Thank God I don't have to anymore."

"I've never ridden with you before, so you could behave for me." Jess clutched onto the door handle for dear life.

"You can't complain." She was the one who had texted Cole, not me. "This is all your doing."

"Just pull over. I'll run the rest of the way." Rage turned around and glanced at me.

"You can't do that." Cole let go of the steering wheel and surveyed the area. "We're in a freaking town. Someone would see you shift, and then shit would hit the fan."

Luckily, the storefront came into view, so we had to survive only a few more seconds of misery.

"See, here we are." Cole squealed his tires as he flew into the parking lot and drove at least fifty miles per hour to the front parking space. There was no one even attempting to get it, but he didn't slow down until he skidded into the parking space while slamming on his brakes.

Desperate to get out of the car, I yanked on the handle and tumbled out. Somehow, I was able to save my latte.

"Now don't be dramatic." Cole frowned and slammed his door shut. "It wasn't that bad."

"Speak for yourself." Jess held her stomach, and her face was a little pale. "I may puke."

"That's it." Rage shook his head and grabbed the keys from Cole. "I'm driving us back. End of discussion."

"I'm feeling a little ganged up on right now." Cole pouted and glanced at the ground. "I don't like it."

Now, I kind of felt bad. "It wasn't that horrible; it was just a little rough. Oh, and a couple of things were unexpected."

"Yeah, like when the bus was in the intersection and you ran a red light." Jess grabbed my arms and placed some of her weight on me.

“All I had seen was the bus coming right at my door, and I swear I could hear the driver screaming as he narrowly missed us.”

“Or when the old people rode their bicycles in the bicycle zone, and you decided that you could go faster in that lane instead of the main road.” I still cringed at the memory. “The old man had to fall on the ground to escape you clipping his bike.”

“He stood back up, though.” Cole threw his hands to the side. “So, he couldn’t be injured that badly.”

Jess grabbed her phone and smiled. “Alright, it’s ten. Let’s get shopping.” She marched right to the doors as if she was daring them to still be locked.

“Why are we here?” Rage walked beside me, taking his time. “I’m assuming the lingerie talk was something Cole was hoping for and not actually happening.”

“You’d be correct on that.” I took the last sip of my drink and threw the cup into one of the garbage cans in front of the strip mall. “I’m getting a dress for tonight.”

“Oh, you’re going?” He focused hard on the doors in front of us.

“With Jess, I doubt I have an option.” Besides, all my other high school dances had been with Greg. We’d always end up eating with his crew. After it was over, we’d wind up at one of his friend’s parties, which involved him getting plastered and trying to feel me up. I’d finish the night by dragging him home and letting him sleep it off. This was a chance for me to do it my way.

“So, who are you going with?” He cleared his throat and looked away from me.

Was he fishing for information? Let’s have a little fun. “Well, they are hot and fun to be with.”

There was a tick in his neck, and his jaw tightened. “I hadn’t realized you made that many friends here.”

“I’m going with Jess.” He thought I was dating someone at school. “And she has to make sure we look perfect, so here we are.”

We were silent as we entered Macy’s together. Cole passed us by and headed over to the guy’s section. “Don’t worry, man. I’m going to find something that will make us look good too.”

“Oh, dear God.” Rage sighed and shook his head. “I better go with him. Otherwise, he’ll have me wearing a pink tux or something worse.”

“Girl, come on.” Jess hollered at me and appeared from behind a rack of clothes. “We’ve got to hurry. We still have to get ready.”

“Duty calls.” I hated that this moment with Rage was ending, but at the same time, it needed to. I couldn’t get attached for several reasons, and the main one was Greg. Even though I realized we didn’t work, he deserved more than a text or a phone call to end it. We had

spent over two and a half years together. Granted, the last six months had me here while he was there. Secondly, even if Greg and I were broken up, Rage wasn't the one I'd need to fall for. It would just leave my heart shattered.

"Have fun." He winked at me, and my knees became wobbly.

Not wanting to become an awkward gawker, I forced myself to join Jess. "So, what are we shopping for? I haven't been to a dance here before."

"Girl, think prom." Jess pulled out a red feathered lacy dress that was low cut and tight. It flattered her pale skin and blonde hair. The feathers seemed to move when she took a step while just holding it, totally embodying the fae look.

"Try that one on." If she didn't, I would, and it wouldn't look quite as great on me.

"That's what I was thinking." She flipped through a few more dresses and pulled out a shimmery green dress that had a slit from the upper thigh all the way to the floor. "Ooh, and this one."

She hurried off to the fitting room as I stayed back, flipping through the rack. There were all sorts of pretty dresses, but I was low on funds. Unlike most of the kids attending Bloodshed, my parents didn't have a ton of money. From what I gathered, even Jess was from a wealthy family, just not filthy rich and one of 'the' families that usually got in—kinda like me, except for the cash.

My phone vibrated again, but I didn't even bother looking at it. Greg had been texting a lot here lately. It was as if he felt our impending doom as well.

"How does it look?" Jess stepped out wearing the red dress and twirled.

"It looks great." I almost believed that if she wore a potato sack, she'd still look amazing.

"Yeah?" She spun around and sighed. "It's so tight around my thighs though. I'm afraid it'll make it hard to dance."

"Well, then. Try on the other one." I turned back to the racks and found a black strapless dress that was gorgeous. I glanced at the price tag and cringed. It wasn't as bad as I was expecting, but still, I couldn't afford it.

"Ohhh, that's gorgeous." Jess rushed back out with the shimmery green dress on. "You should try it on."

"I don't think I'll get anything." I didn't want to tap into my parents' funds more than I already had. "That dress is amazing. I think it's the one."

"Yes, I do too." She twirled around, and the dress bounced. "And it'll be great for dancing too." She reached over and grabbed the hanger of the dress I'd just been eyeing. "Go put this on, and let's look

at it."

"No, seriously I'm fine." I wished I hadn't agreed to come here. I blamed it on my lack of caffeine.

"If you go try it on, I promise not to give you any more grief." Jess laid her hand on her heart.

"Fine." I wanted to try it on. Here's hoping I looked horrible in it.

"You're not heading toward a death sentence. Try to smile." Jess giggled and wrapped an arm around me. "You're only trying on a dress."

She was right, but I refused to tell her that. "Let's get this over with."

Jess entered her dressing room and started changing back into her clothes.

I entered the room right next to her and quickly undressed. This dress just has to look horrible on me. I repeated it several times, hoping the words would make it come true. I slipped the dress on and zipped up the back. When I turned to the mirror, I paused.

Not only did the strapless dress look great on me, it somehow enhanced my breasts. An intricate design of cubic zirconia stones wrapped around my waist, and the dress stopped right above my knees with several layers of thin black material over the base. Damn, it was gorgeous.

"Let me see." Jess demanded from outside my changing room.

The last thing I wanted to do was open the door. Knowing her though, she'd climb through the opening at the bottom. I opened the door, and Jess's mouth dropped open. "Oh my God. You rock that dress."

Yes, I did. It didn't matter since it was too expensive. "Nah, I'm sure I can find something just as nice back home." I closed the door and changed back into my clothes. As I hung the dress back on the hanger, I allowed myself to pout for all of one second.

I opened the door to find Jess waiting for me at the entrance. "All right. Let's get going."

"You're going to look amazing tonight." I was happy for her.

"Do you know where the guys went?" Jess glanced both directions.

"They are in the men's area." Or at least that's what Cole had said earlier.

"Well, we've been here for an hour. I'm hungry and in need of getting back. We have to get ready." She glanced at her phone and frowned. "Do you mind finding them while I check out?"

"Don't mind at all." I turned to go put my dress back when Jess grabbed my arm.

"I'll put it back on my way to the register." She pointed to the customer service desk to the left. "Go ahead and find them. There's no

telling what Cole is up to."

Now that was a fair statement. The one thing you could count on was Cole being unpredictable. It was like he fed off of it. "All right, I'll meet ya up front." I headed to the right, looking for the men's area.

"See, if you wore this, we'd be the talk of the night." Cole's voice came from the discount section.

I found Cole decked out in a black suit that had red hearts all over the jacket, pants, and even the tie.

He was holding up a similar suit to his, but instead of hearts, it had dollar signs. "You could be R Money and I could be C Lover."

"C Lover? Really?" Rage sat in a chair, leaned over with his head in his hands. "Do you know what that could mean?"

"Candy lover? Cat lover?" Cole stared at the ceiling and tapped his lips. "Cook lover?"

"Sometimes I wonder how we're even friends." Rage sniffed and glanced in my direction. "Tell him to stop … please."

"I'm with Rage on this one." They would definitely be the talk of the school. "Do you really want your elitist and elusive persona tarnished by this? People might think you're funny and awkward."

"Dammit." Cole frowned and glanced in the mirror. "You're right. We can't have that." He turned and headed back to the men's dressing area.

"Wait." Rage sat straight and blinked several times. "Did you just reason with Cole?"

"It's actually quite simple if you know how." When it came to his reputation, he cared way too much. The only thing that helped him maintain it was the fact that he didn't let many people in.

"Thank you." Rage sighed and chuckled. "I was honestly afraid he'd demand I wear that shit."

"Hey, that's what friends are for." The words slipped out before I could take them back. I didn't want to just be his friend, and even worse, I implied that I considered him one.

"Did you just friend zone me?" His mouth dropped open, and he flinched.

There was no way to salvage this. Either way I went, it would have come out wrong. "I'm not sure what we are."

"But you do feel something?" He reached out and touched my hand. His face was filled with something similar to hope.

"Yes, but there is Greg." This was a dangerous game I was playing, but I felt like I needed to tell him the truth. "I haven't broken up with him yet."

"Yet. That means you're going to?" There was something sort of desperate in his words.

"Fine, you both win." Cole walked out from the fitting room and

frowned. “You guys will just have to deal with my fine ass in a black suit.”

“Your timing is impeccable today.” Rage stood and growled. “Let’s get out of here.”

“Don’t worry though.” Cole moved beside me as I followed Rage. “We’ll still have fun.”

“I wasn't ever worried about it not being fun.” I rubbed my arms, trying to make the moments before disappear. At the end of the day, I couldn’t lose my focus on what truly mattered.

“It’s about time you guys showed up.” Jess had her dress covered with plastic. “I’m ready to get back.”

“What? That’s it?” Cole’s forehead wrinkled, and he took a step back.

“We have to get ready. No spoilers.” Jess rolled her eyes and waved a hand along her body. “Beauty takes time. After all, the dance starts at six.”

“Don’t worry.” Rage lifted his closed hand with his palm facing downward and then flicked his fingers open. The keys hung on his middle finger. “I’ve got the keys, so no more near-death experiences.”

At least there was one miracle for the day. “I can say that I’m not upset about that.”

“All this shade is making me chilly.” Cole shivered as if he was cold. “For this, a harsh punishment will be dealt.” He winked at me. “Next time you need a ride, someone will be modeling at least one pair of underwear for me.”

“That sounds fair.” I already knew what we could do.

“What?” He startled and put his hand to his ear. “Did I just hear someone agree?” An evil grin crossed his face. “Hell, yeah.”

“Let’s go before he begins demanding other things.” Rage’s eyes landed on me for a moment, causing my heart to speed up. He grinned.

AS WE ARRIVED BACK at the academy, Jess was about to bubble over. “Tonight is going to be so much fun.”

“Why do girls get excited about all these things?” Cole frowned. “All we do is dress uncomfortably.”

“We also get to look our best.” Jess lifted her dress in the air as the wind blew the plastic.

“Hey, why are there two dresses?” That little sneak. She bought my dress too.

“Probably because she was afraid she’d change her mind, so she bought a back-up.” Cole grinned as if he discovered the meaning of life.

“No, she bought the dress I liked too.” I headed over to her and went for the bottom of the plastic cover.

“There is only one dress.” Her face turned pink, and she nodded her head repeatedly. “Maybe the green just looked dark for a second.”

“Uh … no.” Rage appeared behind her and grabbed her shoulders. “It did not.”

Now that he was holding her in place, I raised the plastic. Sure enough, there was her dress and mine. “Jess …”

“Look, I wanted to do it, okay?” Jess shot Rage a dirty look and faced me. “Last year, I didn’t go because I didn’t have a friend. And this time, I do. I wanted to get it so we both could have fun getting dressed together and because you looked damn hot in it.”

I hated the fact that she bought it, but she was more excited about it than I was. “Thank you. I really appreciate it.”

“You’re welcome.” Her eyes glowed, and she pulled the plastic back in place. “We don’t want them getting messed up.”

As we headed off to our dorm room, Rage reached out and grabbed my arm. “Hey, do you have a second?”

Jess giggled and stayed put.

“Yeah, sure.” He led me several yards away from the others before he stopped. “So … I know you still have that loser, but maybe you could save a dance or two for me?”

My wolf howled through me, but I forced her back in place. “Maybe.” I didn’t want to commit to something. Not while I was still technically with Greg.

“I’ll take that.” Rage grinned and moved closer to me. His earthy scent surrounded me, and for the first time in a while, I relaxed.

“Raven?” An all too familiar voice called out to me.

No, it couldn’t be. It had to be my guilt messing around with me. I turned, and there, not even fifty feet away, was my boyfriend. “Greg?”

“Well, I came here to surprise you, but it looks like I got one instead.” His eyes flashed back and forth between Rage and me.

“So, you’re saying she can’t have guy friends?” Cole jumped into action. He closed the distance between us and wrapped an arm around my waist. “I thought you were an alpha. Instead, someone sounds really insecure.”

Pure hate flashed in Greg’s eyes. It brought me right back to graduation when he discovered I was the one they wanted—not him. “Why don’t you mind your own business?”

“Hi, Greg.” Jess stepped forward in front of us and held her hand out. “Raven has said a lot of nice things about you. It’s great to finally meet you.”

Thank goodness, at least one of them was trying to help defuse the situation.

“I’m surprised she found time.” He crossed his arms and leaned back.

“What are you doing here?” I created some distance between me and the guys to hopefully alleviate some of the tension.

He sighed. “Your parents told my Dad that you wouldn’t make it home this Christmas and that there was a dance tonight. So I thought I’d come down here and take you to the dance.”

A deep growl filled the air. Rage was breathing rapidly, and the air grew tense.

Both Rage and Greg were on the edge. Each alpha ready to fight the other for dominance. I had to talk to Greg and let him know where we stood with each other. I always knew it wasn’t going to be an easy conversation, but I didn’t expect to have it here at Bloodshed Academy during a surprise visit. I only hoped that he’d keep his head on straight.

Chapter Fourteen

"What the hell is wrong with him?" Jess stood in her bathroom, organizing all her makeup. "He can't just show up here and pee on you."

Despite everything, that made me giggle. "He's always been like that." However, seeing it now with a new perspective, I guess Greg wasn't really as strong as he thought.

"Seriously, you dated him for two years?" She picked up something that looked like eyeliner and threw it into the garbage. "Maybe I should be asking what's wrong with you."

That was a fair statement. "You've got to realize I was raised with the mentality that no female could ever be a true alpha."

"Are you kidding me right now?" Jess paused with her organizing and turned toward me. Her eyes were wide, and her brows furrowed. "What backwoods hick town did you grow up in?"

"We were right outside Nashville." I always wondered why my parents moved there. They weren't from there and had grown up near New Orleans. "We didn't travel, just stayed put."

"Yeah, I've heard that there are hundreds of packs and supernatural societies that are still following old, outdated practices." She patted her bed and smiled. "Good thing Isadora can find the ones that deserve this chance. Now come on, let's get moving."

Suddenly there was a loud knock on her door. "Raven, I'm hungry. Let's go grab some food."

"She's busy," Jess yelled and marched over to the door, yanking it open.

Greg took a step back, surprise written all over his face. "I wasn't asking you."

Oh, dear God. This was not going to end well. "We're getting ready for the dance tonight. It starts in two hours." Needless to say, the past couple of hours with Greg here had been tense. We'd sat and watched a few shows, not knowing what to say to one another.

"Alright, I guess I'll go mosey around campus for a little while. Then come back and get ready." He turned away, and within a few seconds, the main door shut.

"At least he's gone." Jess spun around and snorted. "I have no idea what you ever saw in him." She grabbed a button-down shirt from her dresser and threw it at me. "Put this on."

"Honestly, it's what my parents expected of me and what I thought was the right thing." Now that I've been here, I couldn't imagine that life anymore. "I never was in love with him. That's why I need to

break it off." I slipped my shirt off and put the one she'd given me on.

"Please tell me you're doing it tonight." Jess grabbed a brush and powder from the bathroom and strolled toward me. "Because I really don't know if I could handle him staying here more than a day."

"You're leaving in the morning, and this is an all-girl dorm." I hadn't even considered this yet. "So, I'm not sure where he'll be sleeping."

She swiped the brush into the powder and attacked my face.

I leaned back, trying to dodge the assault. "You're like ten times paler than me. I can't use your foundation."

"This is fae powder." She brought the offending weapon to her side. "It blends into whatever your skin color is. A person with red skin uses the same powder as me. It's magic."

"There are companies here that claim that too." I had my doubts that it worked as well as getting one that was actually made to blend with your skin color.

"Silly, this is truly magic." She put her fingers in the powder, and it clung to her skin, sparkling. "Once it's on the brush, it's ready to do its job. Trust me."

"Fine, but if you make me look like a clown, I will seek revenge." I trusted her without a shadow of a doubt. She'd been a constant friend since the first day I got here.

"Shush, you." Once again, the brush swiped across my face so many times I lost count. "Almost done."

"I think you've covered each area at least fifty times." I was a bare essential type of girl when it came to makeup. I usually wore mascara and lip stain. That was it, nothing else needed.

"We have to make sure it's even all over your face; otherwise, you might get splotchy." She placed the brush on the bed and rushed back into the bathroom. "Alright, since you're wearing black, let's do smokey eyes." She grabbed some eyeshadows and smaller brushes before heading back over. That's when the real torture began.

"SEE, VOILA." Jess stepped back and waved me to the mirror on her dresser.

Great, I wasn't sure if I was going to like what I saw. When I saw my reflection in the mirror, I was stunned. My usual long, straight, chestnut hair had loose waves, and my brown eyes seemed so much lighter with the smoky eyeshadow framing them. My foundation was flawless, and there was only a hint of pink on both my lips and cheeks. I'd never looked this way before. "You are fucking amazing."

"I'm so glad you like it." She giggled and looked at me. "It's easy to do when you have a great canvas to work with."

All my life, I had never considered my looks as beautiful. My main priority was keeping taps on my wolf. She was a little volatile at times and fought against my hold. Nothing there had changed yet, but at least I wasn't as worried about her coming out. They knew what my weaknesses were here, for better or worse. "Thank you." They were two very simple words, but at the moment, I couldn't think of anything more true.

She sniffled and blinked her eyes. "No, don't you dare." She fanned her face and bit her bottom lip. "I can't cry. My eyes can't be puffy tonight."

"We definitely can't have that." I glanced back at myself and smiled. Maybe tonight wouldn't be so bad after all.

"Okay, my turn." She went inside the bathroom and grabbed another damn brush.

How many of those things can one girl have? My phone buzzed. I grabbed it and saw a message from Damien.

Hey - Professor Shaw wants us to meet him in the woods behind the dorms. Be there in five.

My heart pounded in my chest. It didn't make sense. Why did Professor Shaw want to meet us?

OK- on my way.

"Hey, Damien and Professor Shaw want to meet me, so I'm going to head out for a minute." Thankfully, Greg was still out and about, so I didn't have to sneak out.

Jess stuck her head out of the bathroom and pointed a sharp eyeliner pencil at me. "If you mess up your hair and face, there will be *hell* to pay. Got it?"

Damn, she might be tiny, but she was scary sometimes. "I got it, ma'am." I understood her concern. Every time I came back from one of my sessions with Damien, I was a hot mess. Sweat poured from my every orifice, and my hair looked like I had stuck my finger in an electric socket.

In less than a minute, I was outside, heading to the area Damien had alluded to. Soon, I caught Damien's scent and hurried in his direction.

Apparently, I was the last to show. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, but Professor Shaw might have figured out the main reason for your issue." Damien's face was unreadable, but his right eye twitched now and then. I'd learned a while ago it was his tell when he got stressed.

"One of the things I've noticed, Ms. Wright, is that you always wear that necklace." His eyes went straight to the crescent moon that laid on my chest. "When you are working hard on your studies or stressed, you tend to play with it."

This wasn't brand new information. "Okay?"

"Mr. Weston, here," Professor Shaw placed his hand on Damien's shoulder, "informed me that you've had your particular separation ever since you were sixteen, which is when wolf shifters begin to grow strong. When did you receive that necklace?"

My breath caught. "My mother gave it to me when I turned sixteen."

"I hate to say this, but I'm wondering if it might be spelled." He held out one of his hands. "I did some research and found that a simple touch by a wizard could lift it."

"Are you sure?" That sounded way too easy. All he had to do was touch it, and I'd be whole.

"Yes, wizards are not a common supernatural found in this world." He glanced around the woods and grinned. "See, we aren't at our strongest on Earth. Fae lands are where we prefer to dwell. Although there are a handful that will visit from time to time and others like me who hold important jobs here."

I glanced at Damien. I wasn't sure what to do. Wizards weren't known for their pure intentions or helping others.

He nodded his head yes.

This was one of those times when I had to make a decision. Only, this one seemed so innocent. Trusting Damien and my gut, I removed my necklace. I could see Mom cursing at me in my head, but she'd never have to know. I dropped the necklace into his extended hand.

It felt as though everything was happening in slow motion. The necklace sparkled from the reflecting moonlight as it dropped into the wizard's hand. When it touched his skin, a loud roar echoed in my ear. The sound pierced deep inside of me, and I fell to my knees.

Flashbacks began to play in my head. The time when my wolf didn't like how Greg treated me, various times when I should've stood my ground, and lastly, the night I attacked Damien. I had charged him and sunk my teeth into his neck. I tore at it despite Cole and Rage's screams of protest. The bear was going to hurt me; that was his goal, and I had to stop him. Then, something hard slammed into me, and I blacked out.

My wolf then began to blend with me and take its rightful place inside. Now I understood what they meant by not synced. We weren't two beings in the same body; we were always meant to be one.

Damien was on his knees beside me. "Are you okay?"

I opened my eyes and smiled. I could feel the glow in them begin to subside. "I'm more than okay."

The professor's face was a shade paler as he stood above me, looking down. "I can't believe it. It's true."

"Thank you for helping me." I still didn't trust him, but maybe he

deserved a break.

His shock morphed into a huge grin. “Of course. I can’t wait to see what you’ll become now.”

Okay, that was strange. What did he mean?

“Come on, let’s get you back to the dorm.” Damien helped me stand and wrapped an arm around my waist. His hand was large and hot. It felt so damn good.

“You know I can walk?” I needed distance. It felt like I had become another person. My emotions and senses were heightened.

“She’ll be fine in the next few minutes.” Professor Shaw began strolling deeper into the woods. “They had been two beings, and now they are one. She’s just getting acclimated. I’m going to keep this necklace to ensure there are no residual effects.”

We walked in silence back in the direction of the dorms. That wasn’t unusual for us. Damien wasn’t a big talker, and we’d grown comfortable with one another.

As we approached my dorm, he gave me a smile. “You look beautiful tonight. I hope you have a great time.”

“Are you not going?” Cole and Rage were going, so I figured he would as well.

“No, they aren’t really my thing.” He kicked at the ground and then chuckled. “Honestly, I’ll probably wind up there because of Cole. Though I’ll sneak out really early.”

“I think it’ll be fun. Maybe you need to loosen up and stick around?”

“Raven?” Greg’s voice appeared from behind me.

“What are you doing out here?” It surprised me to see him come out from the deeper part of the woods. Professor Shaw should’ve passed him, and I couldn’t imagine he’d be okay with a random person this close to the university.

“Oh, I was traipsing around the grounds.” His eyes fell on Damien. “This is the second time today I find my girlfriend talking to another guy. However, this time it’s in the woods. Maybe I should be the one asking why you’re out here.”

A growl escaped my lips. “Maybe you should be asking yourself why you’re so insecure.”

Damien took a step closer to me and glared at Greg.

“Don’t get so high and mighty.” Greg’s breathing became ragged. He hated feeling like he was being talked down to. “When you come back, I’ll be your alpha. Don’t fucking forget that.”

This was the problem with little man syndrome. “If that was the case, then why am I the one here?”

A deep chuckle escaped Damien, and something that looked a little like pride reflected in his eyes. “Look, if you’re going to the dance,

you better get back. I'm sure Jess is pissed."

"She's going to kill me." I didn't even bother talking to Greg again as I turned and hurried back to the apartment. Within two minutes, I entered through our door.

When I opened the door, Jess stopped pacing, and it felt like her eyes were shooting daggers. "Where the hell have you been?" She was gorgeous. Her eyeshadow nearly matched her dress color and was mere perfection.

"I'm sorry. But we figured out what was wrong with me and my wolf." I walked past her, making my way into her room. My black dress was hanging on the door's hook. I unbuttoned my shirt and removed the jeans I'd been wearing.

"First, we get dressed, then you fill me in." She unzipped the dress and carefully put it over my head. Once it was in place, she zipped it up. "Damn, girl. You look amazing."

I turned to the mirror once again and took a quick breath. I almost didn't recognize myself.

The main door opened and slammed shut. Greg's musky scent hit me hard, and his footsteps stomped down the hallway toward my room and bathroom.

"What's his problem?" Jess placed a hand on her hip.

"He found me with Damien." I guess it did look bad in hindsight, but he was being an asshole. "In the middle of the woods. Alone."

"I bet that hurt his ego." Jess huffed and rolled her eyes. "He must be overcompensating for his little dick."

"Oh my God." I died laughing, which caused my eyes to water.

"No, none of that." Jess pointed her finger in my face. "You will not mess up my masterpiece."

"Okay. Damn." If I didn't stop myself, she might hurt me. I waved my hand in front of my face, letting the air hit my eyes. "See, drying them up right now."

"Good, now let's go." Jess opened her door and marched like a soldier into the den. "We're leaving, Greg."

There was shuffling in the bathroom, and then the door to my bedroom opened. "Okay, sorry. I didn't expect to be gone for so long."

Was he bipolar? His face was calm, and he gave me his usual grin. "You look amazing."

"Thanks?" I hadn't meant for it to come out as a question, but he'd thrown me off with his sudden niceness. It was like we hadn't just run into each other in the woods.

"Okay, let's go." Jess grabbed her bag and opened the door.

IT DIDN'T TAKE us long to get to the dance. It was held in the school's

main entrance, but someone had hung lights and a disco ball in the center. The lights were low, and there was a DJ in the corner. The room had been emptied of all furniture, and against the wall near the front doors were two tables of drinks. One was labeled blood, and the other was labeled water.

The room didn't even feel like the same one I walked through every day. "This is amazing."

"I know." Jess grinned and seemed to be taking in the room as well.

"This is so much cooler than our dances back at school." Greg watched the dance floor as some of the kids were already out there and grinding on one another.

An earthy smell hit my nose, and I turned, seeking the source. When my eyes landed on Rage, my world seemed to shift, and it felt like I couldn't breathe. He apparently had just gotten here, and his suit hugged his body in all the right places. I couldn't help the arousal that coursed through me.

Soon, his gaze landed on mine, and he began to head in my direction.

"Earth to Rage," Cole called behind him and glanced at Damien. "It's like he's not listening to me. How is that possible?"

"Maybe because you're annoying as hell sometimes." Damien adjusted his tie and groaned.

"You wanna dance?" Greg asked from behind me, but I was at the mercy of Rage's and my connection.

It only took him seconds to finally reach me, but it was like time had stopped.

"You feel it too?" He stopped just a few inches away from me. "It's so damn much stronger than before."

Words were impossible, and all I could do was find the control to nod. If I did anything more, all of my self-control would snap, and I'd be climbing up his chest.

A hand reached from behind grabbed me around the waist to pull me away from Rage.

"Don't fucking touch her." Rage growled and shoved Greg.

"Are you serious?" Greg puffed out his chest and stood his ground.

No matter what happened next, there wasn't going to be a good outcome.

Chapter Fifteen

The music stopped, and the room was filled with silence. We were making a scene. "Come on, let's go outside."

Both guys were staring at each other, neither one wanting to make the first move.

I raised my voice so it was loud and direct. "Outside. Now." I focused on the front doors and made my way through them. I refused to make more of a scene inside.

"This is kind of exciting," Jess whispered as she followed me. "I mean, I have front row seats to this."

"Seriously?" I wanted Greg gone and now. It took tonight for me to finally see how much of an ass he truly was and how he had treated me. I was a piece of property to him and nothing more.

"Don't get me wrong. I don't want to see you hurt." Jess wrapped an arm around me. "But Rage fighting over a girl was something no one ever thought would happen. There've been so many who tried and hoped for that."

"Stop that sentence right there." It was insane for me to get angry, thinking of other girls with him. He belonged to me—only me.

The front doors slammed shut as Greg and Rage made their way outside.

Greg's cheap-ass suit was tearing at the seams, and pure hate was written across his face. "Tell him that you're mine."

"I can't do that." I had wanted to give him respect with this inevitable conversation, but he didn't deserve it.

"Raven, tell him that you're mine." Greg's eyes glowed, forcing the alpha power on me.

Whatever he expected, it wasn't going to happen. I didn't see him as my alpha or someone I needed to listen to. Besides, what kind of pathetic person tries to force the alpha connection when it came to claiming a mate?

"Are you fucking kidding me right now?" I was tired of always taking his shit and living in his shadow. "Don't even try that alpha shit on me."

Cole and Damien appeared beside us. I wasn't sure how they got here, but at the moment, that wasn't my concern.

"Is that dickhead really trying to control her?" Damien took off his suit jacket and placed it in the grass.

The last thing I needed was more people trying to get involved. "You know things aren't working out between us."

"I come down here for a surprise visit, and you pull this shit?"

Greg took a step closer to me, and Rage growled deep.

"First off, had I known you were coming, I would've told you not to bother." This is what he did, made himself the victim in every circumstance. "You know why I wasn't coming home, so this was just your excuse to get down here."

"You aren't allowed to break up with me." His hands clenched into fists, and his face took on a red hue.

"The hell she's not." Rage forced the words out, visibly trying to maintain some sort of control.

"Yes, I am." I wouldn't stay tied to this damn asshole.

"When did you become such a …"

A loud, evil laugh escaped from Cole. "Amazing? Strong? Independent? You better be careful choosing the word you use to complete that sentence." Damien stood next to me on the right and Cole on my left.

"If that was true," Greg snarled and glanced at each of them, "then why are you all protecting her?"

"That's the thing. We aren't." Jess lifted her head high and looked down her nose at him. "We are her friends and will do anything to help her."

It was kinda funny. It took her saying that for me to realize she was right. Even Damien was willing to stand by my side.

"This is bullshit." Greg glanced around, and it must have sunk in that he was greatly outnumbered. "I'm out of here, but expect a call from your parents."

"Looking forward to it." A blatant lie, but I couldn't let him know that. Then it hit me. My parents gave me the necklace that was spelled. I wondered if they knew about that. Surely they didn't. My parents wouldn't want to cause me to be imbalanced.

"You will regret this." Greg stomped off and headed toward the parking lot.

As soon as he was out of sight, my shoulders felt a little bit lighter. I hadn't realized the toll he had put on me.

"Thank the gods he's gone." Jess clapped her hands and grabbed my arm. "Let's go and have fun. We haven't missed much of the dance."

"It's time to put our boogie shoes on." Cole did a cheesy two-step.

"You do realize that's a country dance, right?" They were in there blaring the cha-cha, and he was out here line dancing.

"It's the only respectable dance anyone can do." Cole arched an eyebrow and crossed his arms, practically daring me to argue. "We are in the south and must dance as though we are."

Sometimes, I couldn't help but wonder what his parents were like. Sometimes, there was no reasoning with him.

Damien took a step closer to me and whispered in my ear, “See what I was saying earlier.”

In his defense, Cole was a bundle of life on his own despite being a vampire. He could be a handful at times. “Yeah.” So with the quiet, he could be overwhelming.

“Yeah, you all go on in.” Rage frowned at how close Damien was to me. “I need to talk to Raven alone before we go back in.”

“Of course.” Jess’s eyes lit, and she grabbed Cole’s arm. “Come on, go two-step with me.”

“Hell, yeah.” He lifted an arm in celebration. “Finally, someone who understands.”

“Are you guys really going to make me go back in with those two?” Damien scowled and huffed.

Poor guy, he looked completely miserable. “Now is that chance you’ve been looking for to sneak away.”

“You’re right.” He grinned as the door shut behind Cole and Jess. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Alright, bright and early.” Even though it was technically a break day and I’d finally connected with my wolf, I still felt a little volatile and didn’t want to go home after what had just happened with Greg.

“Yup, our normal place.” He turned quickly and disappeared into the woods, leaving Rage and me alone.

“You’re different tonight.” Rage still stood where he’d been since we got outside.

“Damien didn’t tell you?” I was sure he’d already know.

“No, what?” Rage took a step closer to me. Our connection was like a magnet. It was physically hard not to just wrap my arms around him.

However, I had to stay grounded. I couldn’t be jumping him. We had to meet in the middle. “Professor Shaw determined what was causing my wolf and me to be so … separate.”

“Really?” His eyes scanned over me.

“It was my necklace.” It still hadn’t completely registered with me yet. “He broke the spell, and now we’re one.”

“Why would someone spell you?” A look of concern crossed his face.

“I … I don’t know.” I still didn’t understand that part myself. “My mother gave it to me when I was sixteen.”

“You think it was her?” He watched me with a guarded expression.

“No, no I don’t.” My parents wouldn’t ever do anything like that. “Mom said she’d found it at a local market, and it reminded her of me.” I hoped my voice sounded confident. Honestly, I was kind of wondered if there could be more to the necklace. But my mother wouldn’t hide something like that from me… would she?

“Well, I’m damn glad you figured it out.” Now he was only a breath away. “It’s been driving me crazy.” He reached out and touched my face, which caused a warm buzzing sensation. “There it is, finally.”

Not able to resist, I placed my hand on his. “What is this?”

“We’re true mates.” His breath smelled of mint, and my hormones kicked into overdrive.

I had to focus on his words and not his proximity. “Those don’t happen anymore.” Nowadays, we chose a mate and forced the bond.

“Correction.” His eyes focused on my lips. “They are rare, but dammit, I’ve researched the hell out of it the last six months … because nothing was making sense about why I’m so drawn to you. Then tonight, when I saw you, I couldn't continue the charade. It has to be because your wolf is free.”

“I don’t want to get hurt. You have a reputation.” The words tumbled from my mouth even though I didn’t mean for them to, and I cringed.

“I had one.” He lowered his head, hovering over my lips. “I’m yours forever.”

There was so much brewing between us that it was hard not closing the distance. Still, for some reason, I needed him to be the one to do it.

Finally, he brushed his lips against mine. It felt like electricity running down my spine, but instead of hurting, it was agonizing. He wasn’t close enough. Not near enough.

Responding to his kiss, I deepened it, letting him know I was in for forever as well. When you kissed your fated mate, it really began the bonding. I at least knew that much.

He growled and wrapped his arms around my waist, tugging me close and right up against his arousal. “Damn, you’re driving me crazy. Your scent, your taste, this fucking dress.”

The door opened, interrupting our moment.

“Raven, I don’t give a shit if you guys are making out.” Jess hurried over and tugged me away from him. A small smile lifted her lips, but she kept her stern face intact. “You are supposed to be hanging out with me. So inside. Now.”

In all reality, I didn’t want to leave this moment, but I’d be a shitty friend if I didn’t. “Are you ready to come back in?”

“Sure, let’s go.” He grabbed my hand, interlocking our fingers.

“So, you guys a thing now?” Jess stayed put, staring Rage down.

“We’re more than that,” he said as he tugged me close, nearly kissing my lips again. “I’m hers.”

She smiled, but there was concern in her eyes. “Well, she’s my best friend, so you’re gonna share.”

“Of course, he will.” I untangled myself from him and wrapped my arm around her. “Let’s go dance.”

“Now that’s the spirit.” She opened the door, pushing me inside the room.

Cole was in the middle of the dance floor, still doing the two-step with some girl who barely had anything on. She was batting her eyes and giggling with each step he took.

“Oh, my gods.” Jess stomped and headed straight to Cole. “I leave for two seconds, and you already have someone else taking my spot.”

“Well, she just kinda slipped into my hands and knew the dance.” Cole shrugged and disentangled himself from her.

“Hey, I thought we were dancing.” The girl pouted and leaned over, allowing her cleavage to be on complete display.

“My friend here does it better and takes priority.” He smacked the girl’s ass and turned to Jess. “Come on. No time for pouting.”

They began dancing together. Rage stepped close, placing his arms around my waist. “She gets you in here and then runs off with him.”

“Right, the hussy.” I turned around so we were facing one another. “But I guess this is an acceptable second option.”

“Just acceptable?” He arched an eyebrow and pulled me in close. “Guess I need to work on it.” He began swaying with me.

“You do realize this isn’t a slow dance?” I stepped closer to him, making sure there was no space between us.

“I don’t care.” He leaned down and kissed my lips. His lips were so soft that it felt like mine melted into his.

“Alright, I’m cutting in.” Jordan stood next to us and crossed her arms. “So move.” Her hair was in a tight French twist, and she wore a skin-tight red dress with a slit all the way to her upper thigh. It was so low cut there wasn’t much left to the imagination. It was amazing that they hadn’t been set free by now.

It was like cold water splashed all over me. I pulled back and growled.

“Oh, how cute. The puppy can make noises now.” Jordan laughed and grabbed my arm, tugging me away from Rage.

“Don’t fucking touch her.” Rage’s tone was cold.

“Then get her to move.” Jordan stared at him. “I’m cutting in.”

“No, you’re not.” He grabbed her arm and scowled. “If you don’t let go, I’ll make you regret it. Are you really sure you want to mess with me?”

I was so tired of everyone thinking they could treat me like shit. I turned to face her and kicked her right in her stomach. She flew against the wall hard, and her dress tangled up around her legs.

The music stopped, and people began to gather around so they could watch the show.

“You heard him; the answer is no. Now get your ass moving.” I would never play the victim again. It was time to rewrite my story.

“Do you know who you’re messing with?” Jordan’s eyes glowed, and she untangled herself to get in my face. “You’re nothing here. Hell, you can’t even bond with your wolf. Step aside, and let me show you how a real woman dances.”

Cole appeared on the other side of me, and he tilted his head, examining Jordan. There was a coldness to his face, and he began to advance on her. “Don’t pretend you’re more than you are.” He circled her like she was prey.

“What are you doing? It shouldn’t bother you for me to be with him. After all, you threw me aside just like …” Jordan spat as she pointed to Rage, “… did Ashley. Are you jealous?” Jordan’s heart skipped a beat when she took a step back, and Cole countered, getting even closer. “Rage, tell him to stop.”

“Do you really think I care about you?” Rage stepped toward her, and I would’ve protested if I hadn’t seen his eyes. He was just as scary as Cole right now, but for some reason, I felt truly protected by both of them. “Do you really think you meant something to Cole or could ever mean something to me?”

“I’m more than either of you will ever be.” She stopped moving as they both stalked her.

“Remember, what did I tell you before we started?” Cole narrowed his eyes. “That it was only a fling and not to get attached.”

The thought of them being together was disgusting, but I held my tongue. Too much was at stake in this face-off.

“So, it was you who actually pretended we were more.” Cole’s fangs extended, and a cold smirk crossed his face.

Jordan’s breathing became ragged, and she bit her bottom lip. “But she just started. How is she worthy and I’m not?”

“Because you’re just a nobody who pretends to be more.” Cole grabbed her arm and pulled her to him. “But you see, there are two things she has that you don’t.”

“Oh, really?” She was petrified but trying to pretend she wasn’t. Her voice was strong, but her whole body was quivering. “Which are?”

“The only thing you need to know,” Rage said, standing in front of her, “is that she’s something you’ll never be. She’s my true mate.”

“What?” Jordan’s mouth dropped open.

The people around us began whispering.

“And that’s the only reason you will ever need to know.” Cole released her from his grip and scowled. “Now get the hell out of here before I change my mind and finally hit a woman.”

She stumbled away, her face turning close to the same shade as a

tomato. She caught my eyes though and mouthed the words *you're going to pay*.

Great, now she'd be gunning for me even more than she'd already been.

Chapter Sixteen

After Jordan made her dramatic exit, the music started once more, but I wasn't in the mood to dance. Between Jordan and Greg, things were sure messy, but my need for Rage overshadowed everything.

"What's wrong?" Rage returned to me with concern written all over his face.

"I just need to be alone with you." I hated feeling this way but couldn't help it.

"Hey." Rage patted Cole on the arm. "We're getting out of here."

"Yeah, I guess we just had the best part of the evening." Cole once again looked like the kind-hearted, inappropriate person I'd come to love. "What are we going to do?"

"No, you and Jess can stay and have fun." Rage wrapped an arm around me. "I want some alone time with Raven."

"I wonder why?" Cole arched an eyebrow.

I wanted to melt into the floor. I couldn't even make eye contact with him.

"What's wrong, Ravey?" Jess wrapped her arms around me, giving me a big hug. "Your face is really flushed."

Cole grinned wide. "Rage just said he …"

"Stop." Rage's features showed indifference, but I could see the edges of his lips trying to break into a smile. "That's enough. I think Raven and I need a little fresh air."

"Fine, but when we meet back up tonight, you're going to have to tell me why you never divulged that Rage was your mate." Jess placed her hands on her hips and stared me down.

"Yes, ma'am." I couldn't help but love that crazy fae.

"Go have fun, be safe." She turned her razor-sharp gaze on Rage. "If you hurt her, I will hunt you down like the dog you are."

"That's it. It's final." Cole chuckled and wrapped his arms around Jess. It was funny because he almost had to bend down to reach her. "She is the fifth member of this pack."

"What? Really?" I'd never seen Jess this happy before. Her grin was nearly bigger than her face, and she hugged Cole back with vigor. "This is the best night ever."

"Alright, now that's all settled, we'll see you guys later." Rage placed his hand at the small of my back and ushered me outside.

The night was beautiful. The moon was half-full, and there wasn't a cloud in the sky. The stars seemed to shine a little brighter than they would normally. A few lightning bugs were buzzing about, making it

seem like the stars were twinkling all around us.

“Other than those two odd confrontations, this has been the best night of my entire life.” His earthy scent surrounded me, and his words warmed my heart.

For the first time in my life, I felt content. “Me too. I wouldn’t change it for the world.”

“I hate that we’re all leaving in the morning.” He sighed and leaned over to kiss me on the forehead.

“Aw, I hadn’t even thought of that.” Damn, that sucked. I couldn’t even fathom the thought, but it wasn’t fair to ask him to stay here with me. “What time are you going?”

“Cole is taking me to my pack in Marietta. We’re leaving around seven.” His dark hair shined in the moonlight, and he was even more breathtaking than normal.

“Really … when will you be back?” I was hoping for Christmas, but in reality, I knew it would be after New Year’s Eve. This was the one time that the Academy allowed us to have a break.

“New Year’s Day.” He frowned and pulled me against him. “What about you?”

“Oh, I’m staying here.” I was kinda surprised that Damien hadn’t told him.

“What do you mean you’re staying here?” His forehead wrinkled as he pulled me around so I was facing him.

“Isadora isn’t allowing me to go back home because I’m so out of sync with my wolf.” It was strange that this wasn’t common knowledge.

“So, what are you supposed to do?” His hands touched the bare skin of my back, causing the warm buzzing to take over my senses.

“Damien is staying to train me over the break.”

“At least he’s one I trust.” His lips touched mine, and the conversation we were having seemed to fade away.

He picked me up like a damsel in distress and began walking but still not breaking the kiss.

I giggled, not able to help myself. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see when we get there.” He lowered his mouth to mine once more, and I relaxed in his arms, enjoying the moment. Before long, we were in the boy’s dormitory.

“Am I even allowed to be here?” I whispered the words, afraid someone would spot us any second.

“Yes, you’re fine. Both Cole and I have been in your room.”

“Oh, yeah.” It always felt normal to have them there. I never once considered whether we could have guys in our rooms.

“You’re so damn cute and innocent.” He passed the elevators and continued down the hall.

We turned down a hallway that had four doors on each side. He continued down the hall, stopping at the last one on the right. “Alright, here we are.” He bent and gently placed me so that both of my feet were on the ground. He pulled a key out of his pocket and unlocked the door. “Welcome to my humble abode.”

As I entered, the scents of cotton candy, pine, and earth filled the den. “Your roommates with Cole or Damien?”

“Both.” His den and kitchen were larger than ours, but other than that, it appeared the same. He pointed down the hallway on the left. “This is where my room is, and the right hall is where Damien and Cole’s are.”

“Wait, they sleep together?” I didn’t get that kind of vibe from the two of them.

“Hell, no.” Damien stepped out of the hallway Rage had just pointed down. “There are two bedrooms off this hall, and each has its own bathroom. I want to make that very clear.” He had already changed out of his suit and was dressed in a pair of gray pajama bottoms and a shirt. “The only reason why Rage got that one was because he got to the academy first.”

“But you’re not bitter at all.” Rage headed into the kitchen and opened the fridge. He pulled out a beer and took a swig.

“Nope.” Damien glanced in my direction and cleared his throat. “You never bring girls here. Why now, and why her? You know I’m training her.”

“Don’t worry. This is different.” Rage gazed at me tenderly. “Do you want anything to drink?”

“No, I’m good. Thanks.”

“Look, I know you got the hots for Rage. I’ve known it from day one, but you need to think this through.” Damien sighed and ran his hand through his hair. “I don’t want things to get awkward between us later.”

Ahh. His concern made sense now.

“It won’t be an issue.” Rage took another swig and made his way back to me, wrapping his arm around my waist. “She’s my mate, Damien.”

“What?” Damien’s brows furrowed, and he looked confused.

“We’re true mates.” I felt like I had to say something. Rage had been doing all the talking. “So, he can’t get rid of me.”

“Well, thank the gods.” He moved to the couch and sat down on it. “I thought you two acted really strange around each other. It must have finally clicked when your block was removed tonight.”

“Yeah, that’s what I figured too.” I glanced down and played with the hem of my dress.

An awkward silence descended when Damien finally stood and

chuckled. “Well, I need to run to the main building for a while and make sure nothing crazy happened. I had just gotten a text from Isadora before you two came in.” He stood and moved past me. “I’ll be back later.”

“Hey, you’re in pajama pants.” I didn’t want him to go out and embarrass himself.

“I hate to tell you this, but once my PJs are on, there’s no taking them off until the morning.” He opened the door and glanced at me. “She knows what she’s getting.”

When the door shut, Rage turned me around and kissed me. His mouth tasted of mint and beer, something I never would’ve imagined I’d like, but it was delicious. He picked me up and hoisted me so that I could wrap my legs around his waist. He carried me into his bedroom and placed me on his bed. He stood and stared at me. “Damn, you’re beautiful.” He locked the door and then climbed over me, placing some of his weight against me. “We don’t have to do anything if you don’t want to.”

“No, it’s not that. It’s just Ash …”

He placed a finger over my lips. “I can’t take away my past, but I’ll tell you one thing. No one has ever been in my bed.”

Some of the tension released from my body, and when he kissed me again, there was no hesitation. I kissed him back and pulled him down closer to me.

His hands grabbed my waist, digging his fingers into me.

A groan escaped me, but I didn’t give a damn. I sucked on his tongue as his hands made their way to my breasts. He slipped them under the top of my dress, rubbing just the right way. I never felt so close to someone before and I never wanted this to end.

I clung to him even tighter until I felt his hardness, and I began rubbing myself against it.

“Damn, I don’t want to go fast.” He kissed down my neck, lower and lower, until he reached my breasts, sucking on them.

My hands grabbed at his jacket, yanking it off. He raised so he could get his arms out of the sleeves. While he was up, I ripped his button-down shirt, pushing it off at the same time.

When I was able to see his glorious chest, it only turned me on even more. Every muscle was well defined and sexy as hell.

He grabbed my waist and flipped me over, unzipping my dress. He slipped the material over my hips and kissed every inch of flesh on the way down.

As he reached my panties, he kissed the inside of my legs. In that moment, everything had changed. He was the man I always wanted and didn’t know. There had been enough foreplay, and I needed him now, needed him to claim me.

I flipped back around and grabbed the waist of his slacks, quickly unbuttoning his pants. I pulled them and his boxers off at the same time. He was as ready as I was.

"You know, this is the final thing. We're mated. No ceremony needed. You're mine if we do this. Forever." He climbed back on top of me and looked into my eyes. "Are you sure?"

"Of course I am." As soon as those words left my lips, he plunged into me over and over again. Our souls connected and everything fell into place.

Pushing him over, I climbed on top and rode him. He was now hitting deeper and deeper until I came unglued.

We both groaned as our muscles contracted, and I fell against his chest.

"Are you okay?" He laughed and pulled me close.

"More than okay." That was the best sex I'd ever experienced. "Are you?"

"This has been the best moment of my entire existence. Now I don't have just a true mate; I have a bonded mate." He kissed my lips and started doing it all over again.

RAGE'S PHONE KEPT BUZZING.

"Don't you think you should answer that?" We'd lost count of how many times we'd been together, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

"Yeah, I guess so. We need to get moving anyway. I'm sure Cole will be here any second. He leaned over to pick up his underwear and pants before pulling them on. He grabbed the phone and groaned. "Get dressed. We have to go."

I jumped out of bed, quickly pulling my panties and dress back on. My hair was a mess, but there was no way to fix that here. "What's wrong?"

"Isadora wants to see us." He groaned and put the phone in his pocket.

"Is everything okay?" I'd never been called to the headmaster's office before. It had to be everything I messed up with Greg and Jordan. Ugh, this felt like being called to the principal's office.

He grabbed his shirt and then chuckled. "So, there's no salvaging this."

"Uh … sorry?" There wasn't anything more I could say than that even though I really wasn't.

"I'm not." He walked over and kissed my lips. "Alright, the longer we wait the worse it'll get." He moved to his closet and grabbed another shirt. This time, it was a white polo and not a button-down.

"What did we do?" I wasn't sure what to expect. I'd never gotten in

trouble before.

"Don't worry. Jordan probably ran over to complain that we were bullying her." He grabbed my hand, pulling me out the door. "But the thing is, we would've never done that if she hadn't caused a scene. I'm sure she left out that important part, so we just have to go and tell Isadora what really happened."

IT DIDN'T TAKE LONG for us to reach her office. I'd never been in it before, but it was one place I'd never forget. The floor was a dark pine, and there was a large dark cherry wood bookcase that took up the whole wall. In the center of it was a cut out entirely filled with a painting of a woman that very much favored the woman who was sitting at a huge desk placed in front of it. The desk seemed to be made of the same dark cherry wood as the bookcase with a large leather desk chair sitting behind it. She had four seats in front of the desk, which were already occupied by Jess, Cole, and Damien.

"So nice of you two to join us." Isadora was sitting in the chair right behind the desk. Her sparkling green eyes seemed to rake up and down me. "We've been trying to get in touch with you both for a while now."

"I'm sorry about that." Rage tensed but refused to let go of my hand.

"No excuses then?" She leaned back in her chair and placed her two index fingers under her chin.

"It was my fault." I refused to let Rage take the blame.

Cole chuckled and elbowed Damien. "It takes two to tango."

"Will you two shut up?" Jess grinned but at least pretended to be offended by what Cole had just said.

"Two?" Damien shook his head. "I believe Cole was the only one talking. I always get lumped in with you two even when I'm not involved in your shit."

"You're known for who you hang out with." Cole swayed his index fingers Damien's way.

"Will you cut the shit?" Isadora glared at Cole as she stood. "Now, Ms. Wright and Mr. Jackson, please come in and join us."

Rage placed his hand on the small of my back and guided me to take the chair. I wanted to argue with him, but I wasn't going to test Isadora's patience.

"I was informed of a very public disturbance tonight." She paced behind her desk with a frown that seemed to be permanently placed. "It involved two of my most influential students."

"Oh, come on. It was that bitch Jordan causing shit again." Cole slumped in his seat and groaned.

“If you want to act like a toddler, then I shall treat you like one.” She slammed her hand on the desk, and her teeth extended.

“With all due respect, I have to agree with Cole on this one.” Damien closed his eyes and grimaced. “Jordan and Ashley have taken a keen interest in not only Cole and Rage but Raven as well.”

“I bet that hurt to admit,” Jess whispered, but with all of the supernatural ears in the room, every single one of us heard her.

“Traitor.” Cole crossed his arms, somehow sinking even further into the chair.

“So, tell me your version of what happened tonight?” Isadora arched an eyebrow, and her eyes landed on me.

“Oh, well Damien texted me to tell me …”

Rage interrupted me. “I was dancing with Raven and Jordan tried to cut in.”

Her eyes cut to Rage. “Pray tell, what was the problem with that?”

“I’d just discovered that Raven was my mate, and I didn’t want to leave her.”

Isadora breathed deeply. “True mate?”

“Yes, we were connecting, and she interfered.” Rage touched the back of my chair, leaning against me. “We explained that to Jordan, and she wouldn’t let up.”

“Well, she did ask for it this time, I suppose.” She sat in the chair and crossed her legs. “However, this cannot be a common occurrence, or there will be repercussions. I have too much at stake with another issue. I don’t have time to deal with your toddler-like antics. Am I clear?”

“Of course.” Damien stood and headed to the door, opening it.

“Don’t worry, Izzy.” Cole jumped from his chair and winked at her. “We won’t let you down.”

“For the last time, Mr. Weston, my name is Isadora, not Izzy.” Her eyes began sparkling again, but there was still an edge to her tone.

“You can’t blame me for getting it confused.” Cole grabbed Jess’s hand and pulled her up. He wrapped an arm around her and pointed at Isadora. “Night, Izzy. Make sure you get some rest.” They both walked out the door as the headmaster sighed.

As I neared the door, Isadora cleared her throat. “Oh, and Miss Wright?”

I paused and turned around. “Yes?”

Rage passed through the door but stopped at the threshold.

“Professor Shaw informed me that you had some kind of block on your wolf and that you are now as one.” She tapped her fingers together and paused. “Make sure you get it under control before the others come back from winter vacation. If not, I’ll have to take things into my own hands.”

Great, not only do I have two girls who are out to get me, but the headmaster just threatened me again. I wasn't sure how I was going to survive this school.

Chapter Seventeen

It felt lonely staying in my apartment without Jess, tinkering around. I was already missing Rage even though he'd only been gone for two hours. When did I turn into this girl?

I made my way into the kitchen and got a glass of water. I'd barely gotten any sleep, especially after our meeting with Isadora. Rage promised me that everything would be fine. He thought that since everyone knew I was his mate and that Cole was loyal to me; things would begin to slow down. But I wasn't so sure. I might've synced with my wolf, but I still had so much to learn.

A knock at the door froze me in my tracks. Maybe I had just jinxed myself. I tiptoed over to the door, looking through the peephole.

"Rave, just open the damn door already. I can smell you right there." Damien sighed and knocked on the door again.

Damn, I really needed to get my head in the game or I wouldn't survive. Not even bothering with a response, I unlocked the door and opened it.

"Who the hell did you think I was?" Damien put his hands in the pockets of his jeans.

"You'll say I'm overreacting just like Rage said before he left." I hated this feeling of being a walking target. "It's not that I don't trust him, but there's something about both Ashley and Jordan that's bothering me."

"There is no doubt that they're going to come after you." He leaned against the edge of the door. "That's why we need to make sure you're in control, especially now that you're one with your wolf."

The fact that he agreed with me completely threw me off my game. "What?" Wow, I was being so very eloquent here.

"I said I agreed with you." Damien chuckled. "Rage has an inflated ego at times. He has a god tendency even if he has good intentions. Those girls are vicious and obviously want you dead."

It was nice for someone to be on my side. "But my wolf and I are merged. Doesn't that solve everything?"

"No, it doesn't. You still have to feel out your bond." He scanned me from top to bottom. "I'm honestly surprised I didn't find you in your pajamas."

"If only you'd come like five minutes earlier." It was odd, but somehow all three of those guys had made their way into my heart. Rage would've regardless, for obvious reasons, but not the other two. Somehow, they'd managed it all on their own.

"Thank goodness I didn't. Since I don't think Rage would be very

happy with me." His gaze went to the den. "Go get a couple changes of clothes. I don't need Rage killing me before I get to ring in the New Year."

Not arguing, I ran into my room and grabbed a bag, piling it with three changes of clothes. He said a couple, but I figured an extra outfit might be warranted. Better to have extra and not need it than the opposite.

"Alright, I'm ready." I threw the pink zipper bag over my shoulder.

We made our way to the first floor and out the door.

"Let's go to our usual spot." Damien led the way, and we moved in amicable silence.

When we reached the clearing, he paused. "Now, we need to do things differently here. It's not going to be like the last time."

"Okay, let's do this." I figured there was no point in being negative. I threw my bag on the ground.

"Alright, we're going to recreate the very first night you got here, but I want you to not shift." He walked across the opening and slid behind some trees.

Overall, shifters aren't uncomfortable with nudity, but we still didn't go out of our way to have our dangly bits on display for everyone to see.

A loud roar broke through the silence, and all my instincts kicked into gear.

It didn't take long for Damien in his large grizzly form to come racing into the clearing. He pawed at the ground, and his eyes landed on me. He roared once more before charging toward me.

Even though I knew this was an exercise, it felt real. He looked pissed. My bones began to crack as the shift pressed upon me.

No, this can't happen. Damien told me to control myself and not let this happen. I took a deep breath, trying to remain calm. However, another bone cracked, and my hands grew fur. No, dammit. I thought this would be easy.

When he was within ten feet of me, his mouth opened wide, revealing his sharp teeth with drool dripping out the sides. He stood on his hind feet, ready to fight.

That's all it took for the shift to happen. My clothes ripped, and fur sprouted all over me. I howled and prepared to attack.

Damien then dropped to all fours, and every ounce of aggression vanished. He ran back in the direction he'd come from to shift back.

It pissed me off that I'd shifted. I thought there wouldn't be any problem for me to remain human. With my teeth, I grabbed the strap of my bag and dragged it behind two large trees. I shifted back and chose a gray shirt and black yoga pants. I dressed quickly and met Damien back in the clearing.

“Ugh, I messed up.” I hated that I failed.

“To be honest, you did better than I expected.” He gave me one of his rare grins. “I almost thought you weren’t going to shift.”

“It was a struggle.” More than I liked to admit. “But at least I didn’t blackout like that first night.”

“That’s the point of this exercise.” He picked a twig from his hair. “If it were easy, then we wouldn’t need to work on it.”

“You’re right.” Isadora’s threat rang in my ears. “Okay, I’m ready to try again.”

Pride seemed to gleam from his eyes. “Alright then, let’s try again.” He turned and ran back to the area across from me. He slipped between two trees and disappeared.

Okay, I have to concentrate more and be in control. I threw my arms to each side and jogged in place.

Damien appeared again in his bear form, but when his eyes landed on me, his big grizzly mouth lifted at the corners. It seemed like he was laughing.

Great, even in animal form, I was being made fun of. I stilled and waited for the inevitable attack. “What are you laughing at? At least when I shift, I don’t smell like ass.” Damnit. Maybe I shouldn’t be poking at the big ass bear.

He roared loud and began a quick run toward me. He could run fast for such a large animal.

The adrenaline pulsed inside me, and my body once again wanted to shift. I closed my eyes, trying to block out his attack. However, his heavy breathing and loud steps seemed to echo in my ears. The closer he got, the harder it was to ignore.

When it felt like he was right on me, my eyes popped open, and my bones began to crack all on their own accord. I tried to hold it back, but it felt like my body was fighting against me. All too quickly, I lost control. My bones broke, and the ground seemed to drop out from under my feet as I shrank once again, back into my wolf form.

My breathing was ragged, and I whined in frustration. All this seemed to knock the strength out of me. Ugh, I messed up again.

FOR THE NEXT WEEK, every day played out the same way. Damien and I would head to the same spot, and over and over again, I failed. The only good news was it did seem as if I was gaining some control, but still not anywhere near what I needed to have.

I grabbed a cup of coffee from my Keurig and made my way to the couch. Damien’s family apparently didn’t live far away, so he was spending Christmas morning with them, leaving me alone in my apartment. He’d offered to take me with him, but it would’ve made

the wrong impression. Going to a guy's house on Christmas to spend time with him and his family just felt wrong since it wasn't Rage.

Of course, I missed that man too damn much. We'd talked every night, but it wasn't the same as him being here with me. It was amazing that I'd met my mate, my true mate, but I hated that he had to leave the very next day.

My phone rang, so I grabbed it from the table in front of me. Of course, it would be my parents. I wished more than anything I could be there with them. However, Isadora wanted me here until my wolf and I were in complete sync with one another. I couldn't be out and about feeling threatened and shift in front of humans. "Hey."

"Merry Christmas." My parents both said in unison.

"Aw, Merry Christmas." Hearing their voices tugged on my heart even more.

"We miss you, baby girl." My dad's voice was strained as if he was trying not to cry.

"I miss y'all too." They both meant the world to me. I reached for my necklace and grasped air. "I'm sorry I couldn't make it home."

"We know it's not your fault." Mom's tone had an edge for some reason. "Still, you never told us a specific excuse for not coming home for Christmas."

For some reason, my gut told me not to tell her, at least for now. I didn't suspect my parents had anything to do with the necklace and its block, but I needed to figure out who spelled it before I tell them what happened. Speaking of which, I needed to get it back from Professor Shaw. "Just struggling with my wolf still, and that causes a risk for anyone I'm around. Especially if I leave here." That was the truth, so I wasn't lying, just omitting certain details.

"Maybe being around family would help you." Mom's voice got higher.

"Liz …" Dad was always the peacemaker in our family.

Mom and I were very similar, which caused us to fight with each other. Now that I'd been here, I realized she had alpha running in her blood as well. It was a shame that she didn't utilize it.

With the way Mom was acting, I decided I needed to get off the phone with her and fast. I knew it was going to turn into an argument otherwise. "Hey, guys, I've got to run."

"Okay, honey. We just wanted to let you know that we miss you." Dad was quick to speak first. "When you get back home, we'll celebrate Christmas."

Damien had told me we get a week's break in the summer, so it wouldn't be a full year before I saw them again. Just the thought of that break was comforting. "I love you both. Bye." I hung up as tears sprung from my eyes.

I'd never felt alone like this before. If I'd been home, we would've opened gifts and even had breakfast together. Now, I was sitting here all alone with cold seeping throughout my body. Not only had I kept the secret about the necklace, but I hadn't even told my parents about Rage yet either. I figured there was plenty of time for that.

A loud knock rapped against the door.

That man was ruthless and wouldn't give up. "Damien, I told you I wasn't going to your family event." I jumped to my feet and reached the door, swinging it open.

It was Rage.

I jumped into his arms and wrapped my legs around him. I missed him so damn much. "What are you doing here?"

"Isn't it obvious?" He hugged me tightly. "I couldn't stay away from you any longer, and I couldn't miss our first Christmas together."

It'd only been a week, but it felt like years. Tears glistened in my eyes. "I'm so glad you're here."

"Hey, it's okay." Rage rubbed my back and gently placed me on the ground.

"So now your parents hate me." I sniffed and tried wiping the tears away from my eyes.

"Not at all." He leaned down and kissed my lips. "Mom said she'd been expecting this ever since I told them I found my true mate and that she wasn't allowed off-campus."

"I hate that I sound so weak." This year had never made me feel so insecure and brave at the same time. I needed to move more into the braver side.

"My Dad said that only the strongest suffer like you are." He placed his forehead against mine. "He said that when he went here, there was a girl that was struggling in the same ways as you. Her wolf was so strong she had to be trained to keep both sides of herself in check. They had such high expectations of her, but when her mate got hurt, she left with him instead."

"They just let her go?" That didn't sound like the Isadora I had met since being at the academy.

"Actually, it was the exact opposite." His woodsy scent surrounded me. "Apparently, Professor Shaw and Isadora refused to let her go, but she slipped out one night, never to be seen again."

"Well, of course she would." A mate was the strongest bond formed between our kind.

"Of course. But the strange thing was Isadora tried finding her over the years, and she's not even a blip on her radar." Rage shrugged and kissed me once more. "Enough of that shit. It's the present." He pulled a small package from his jacket and handed it to me. It was wrapped in shiny blue paper with snowmen all over it. "Open it." A

huge grin filled his face.

It still caught me off guard when he smiled like that. I was lucky to be the one who got to receive those. “Well, come in first.” I giggled and ran back to the couch, diving onto it. I needed to see what this was pronto.

He shut the door and chuckled. “You’re not excited at all, are you?”

“Nope, but out of obligation, I’m trying to humor your male ego.” I tore the paper off and found a jewelry type box. He better not of spent a ton of money on me. As I opened the lid, a necklace came into view. It was a silver necklace with a large ruby pendant outlined by a silver edge. “It’s gorgeous.”

“I figured since the Professor took your moon necklace, you might need a replacement.” He glanced at the ground as his cheeks took on a pink hue.

“It’s perfect.” I’d never seen anything so beautiful. I gently held the necklace and lifted it. The light shone off the ruby pendant, making it even more beautiful. “I love it. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He took the necklace from my hands and twirled his finger around. “Let me put it on you.”

“There was no need for you to spend so much on me.” I lifted my hair and turned so he could slip it around my neck.

“Don’t worry about it.” He hooked it and placed a hand on my shoulder. “It’s a family heirloom.”

Meaning it was worth even more than I realized. “Are you sure …”

He sat next to me, and his eyes landed on the pendant that laid against my chest. “Positive. And it was made for you.”

Now, I was even more nervous about the gift I had made him. “One second, let me go grab yours.”

“Okay.” The side of his mouth twitched upward. “Hurry back.”

I ran into my bedroom and grabbed the gift out of the closet. I just hoped that the string art I made of Tennessee would be something he’d like. It did take me several days to make it, which was good since I’d been bored this past week.

As I walked into the room, Rage’s eyes landed on it. He stood and took it from my hands. I had placed a heart where we first met. “The heart is your hometown, isn’t it?”

“Yes, even then I felt something for you. I just didn’t realize the magnitude until my wolf and I merged.” To think what I would’ve missed out on had I not come here.

“When my eyes landed on you, there was no way in hell I would have left without you.” He reached over and tucked some of my hair behind my ear. “I’m just glad we got it all sorted out. It was unimaginably hard those six months, not being with you.”

“At least we don’t have to worry about it now.” There was no way I’d be going anywhere without him.

“When is your next training session with Damien?” Rage leaned back against the sofa and pulled me into his arms.

“Tomorrow. He’s spending today with his family.” Having Rage here with me helped the loneliness I had felt earlier disappear. Just being with him made this the best Christmas I’d ever had before.

“Do you mind if I go with you?” Rage kissed the side of my face as his fingers gently trailed over my arm.

The thought of him watching me fail tore at me, but maybe he could help me. “No, but I hate for you to see me struggling.”

“Nothing will ever change how I feel about you.” He kissed me once more.

He was right. We were mates. If anything, we should have been stronger together. “Okay.” I turned my head so my mouth captured his and deepened the kiss. Soon his hands were running up my sides and slipping under my shirt. I groaned with need for him; needing more.

I lifted myself and wrapped my legs around his waist. He was already hard, wanting me just as much as I wanted him. I slipped my shirt over my head, and he gasped when he realized I wasn’t wearing a bra.

“You’re going to kill me.” He lowered his head, suckling my breasts, and unconsciously I began to grind against him.

“Now.” I didn’t want slow and steady. No, I wanted fast and hot. I grabbed the waist of his blue jeans and unbuttoned them. “Off, now.” I couldn’t take them off myself, not with me sitting on him. I slipped off, and he happily obliged by removing his pants and underwear. He reached over and yanked my yoga pants to the ground and grabbed my hips placing me back on top.

Not wasting any time, he entered me. I rode him hard until our muscles began to contract. He leaned down placing my breast in his mouth, causing everything to feel even better. Ecstasy took over as we both climaxed together. “Oh, gods.”

“You are so damn hot.” He kissed me again, ready to go for yet another round already. And that was how we spent the rest of Christmas Day.

HUSHED VOICES STARTLED me from my sleep. I reached across, looking for Rage, but that side of my bed was cold. He hadn’t been lying here for quite a while.

“The other night, I saw more people wearing cloaks coming out from the woods.” Damien’s all too familiar voice was part of the

whispering, which meant Rage had to be the other.

I quickly threw on clothes and headed into the den.

They were sitting in silence when I entered. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” Rage patted the seat next to him. “Damien and I were just catching up.”

Damien was in the kitchen, but his arms were crossed. “You ready for training?”

“Yes, our time is almost up.” I leaned into Rage, and he wrapped his arm around my shoulders.

“You still okay with me going?” Rage kissed my lips.

“Yeah, as long as Damien approves.” I grinned and glanced at Damien.

“It might help since he’s another wolf. So maybe he’ll understand what you’re going through more than me.” Damien handed me a coffee and protein bar when he walked by the couch. “Eat up, and let’s go.”

Rage smirked at our interaction. “Damien, you’re getting soft.”

“Shut it.” Damien glared at Rage. “She needs focus and energy. That’s it.” He sighed and stretched out his back. “Besides, we need to be careful.”

“Careful about what?” It must have something to do with what they were talking about earlier before I came in.

Rage gave him a warning look. “You getting a handle on your wolf.” He grinned, but there was something off in his eyes. He bopped my nose. “You’re our number one priority.”

He was hiding something from me, and I didn’t like that. Something was definitely wrong.

Chapter Eighteen

As we headed toward the woods, both Rage and Damien were being extra cautious. I watched them glance around as if something were about to attack us. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Rage said as he intertwined my fingers with his. “Just being cautious, that’s all.”

“You normally aren’t cautious.” It was kind of cute that he thought he could hide things from me. I was willing to play the obedient and quiet girl part for a short time, but not too much longer.

Damien snorted. “She has you there.”

“You better watch it.” Rage arched his eyebrow at his friend. “I’ll start telling everyone all your secrets.”

“Do you think that scares me?” Damien rolled his eyes. “You’ve got nothing.”

We reached the clearing, and I dropped my bag of clothes on the ground beside me.

“How many outfits did you bring this time?” Damien glanced at the bag.

He must have noticed it was twice as packed. “I’m determined to get this today, so I brought ten changes of clothes.” That was one of the nice things about living here. They ensured our wardrobes were complete for casual days, uniforms, pajamas, and even aew sets of nice dress clothes for special occasions. They restocked our clothes, wanting all of us to appear put together and strong. However, we were still free to buy other things if we desired.

“You’re going to kill this.” Rage gently squeezed our connected hands.

“Let’s try not to kill me in the process, okay?” Damien shook his head as he ran across the woods, slipping between the trees just like last time.

The anticipation of Damien running out was sometimes worse than when he appeared. I moved away from Rage, needing to concentrate. I rubbed my fingers together and then popped my neck.

Within seconds, Damien roared and came barreling toward me.

He hadn’t done that before, so it caused my adrenaline to pump even harder. I took deep breaths, trying to calm down, but it didn’t help.

As he approached, he stood on his hind legs and growled once more.

Once again, my limbs began to crack, and fur covered my body. Dammit, I messed up again.

I grabbed my bag with my teeth and dragged it behind a tree so I could change back and dress. I didn't know why I wasn't getting this. Once I was dressed, I headed back out to where Rage was waiting. "Did he already go back?"

"Yeah, but he's going to wait for my call before we try this again." Rage's hand reached out and brushed my cheek. "When he charges you, what are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking I can't shift. That he's not attacking me, that it's all a ruse."

He nodded his head and sighed. "That's your problem."

"Okay, what am I supposed to be thinking?" I sounded like a newly shifted wolf and hated it.

"There will be times when you don't know if someone is a friend or foe." He grabbed my hands and opened them. "You don't want to show your fear in either situation. So instead of concentrating on not shifting, focus on what your next move would be."

"So instead, get a defensive plan ready?" Okay, that kind of made sense. Here I was thinking I shouldn't shift because he won't hurt me even if it sure as hell seemed that way. Maybe having a plan would make me feel better and more in control.

"Exactly." His dark eyes seemed to warm as he watched me.

"Okay, got it." I stretched my arms and took one more deep breath, preparing for the attack. "Ready."

Rage let out an ear-piercing whistle, and within seconds, Damien came barreling toward me.

This time, I thought if he didn't stop and got within two feet of reaching me, I'd kick him in the nuts. I figured that should distract him long enough for me to shift and attack in my animal form.

I watched as he took each step, progressing closer and closer to me. For once, I didn't feel like the prey but the predator.

He roared and stood on his hind legs. Within seconds, he was right in front of me, and the urge to shift wasn't taking control.

Another roar echoed in my ears as Damien bent down, leaning his bear right in my face. His breath smelled rancid and made my stomach gurgle.

"Dude, you need to brush your teeth." I fanned my hand in front of my face. "Like really bad."

Damien closed his mouth and lowered his body, putting all four paws on the ground. He huffed and then turned to run away.

"That was perfect." Rage laughed as he stepped next to me and turned me around so I could face him. "See, I knew you'd get it." He kissed my lips and pulled back.

"With your help." I wasn't going to lie. I was pretty happy with myself right then.

“I just planted the idea,” he said as he tapped my forehead with his index finger. “You’re the one who accomplished it.”

The trees across the clearing moved as Damien appeared in his fully clothed human form. “You did it.”

“Thank goodness. I was getting nervous that I wasn’t going to get it.” The headmaster’s warning echoed in my mind again. Isadora seemed like a woman who kept her word and was a hard ass. I didn’t want to end up on her shit list. “Rage gave me a suggestion that worked.”

“So now we need to practice your fighting.” Damien glanced around and then back at Rage. “Let’s end training for today. We can start that tomorrow. You’re progressing very nicely.”

So tomorrow, my real training begins.

“NOW GO FOR HIS THROAT,” Rage yelled as Damien’s bear stood on his hind legs.

My eyes focused on Damien’s neck, his weak point. As I lowered to the ground, I jumped as high as my wolf legs would allow. However, as I was within two inches of his neck, Damien used one of his arms, slamming me into the ground.

I slid across the grass until colliding into a tree. Damn, that really hurt. Still, I refused to show weakness.

As Damien turned around heading for his section across the clearing, I ran quietly and leaned down, nipping at his legs, causing him to lose his balance and fall to the ground.

“Hell, yeah.” Rage laughed and ran over to me, stroking my white fur.

It felt amazing being petted by him in this form. His fingers combed easily through my fur.

Damien got back on his paws, but there was a limp to his right hind leg. He growled and turned, heading to where he changed.

“Well, it looks like he has had enough.” Rage dropped his hand to his side and chuckled. “Why don’t you go get changed while I check on him?”

I nodded and sprinted back toward my clothes. After I was dressed, I waited on the other two to hurry up.

When they both appeared, Damien limped even in his human form.

“I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you like that.” My side still ached from the tree, so maybe it was karma kicking his ass.

“Well, in that form, I’m around six hundred pounds, so falls hurt.” He sighed, but there was no malice in his eyes. “Sorry for pushing you like I did. You hit that tree hard, but you bounced back, which was

perfect.

"My mate is amazing." Rage kissed my lips and took my hand.

"Okay, none of that here." Damien rolled his eyes but winked at me. "The best thing you could do for your mate is to not tell her what to do where I can hear you."

"Yeah, it just kinda fell out." Rage cringed and dodged a low hanging branch.

"No worries." I didn't want him to feel bad. "I still brought him down in the end."

"That you did." Damien limped behind us but was still keeping pace.

"How about we go back to my room, and I'll stick some pizzas in the oven?" Between those two and myself, we could eat a full pizza each, if not more.

"That sounds good to me." Damien stumbled over some roots but grabbed a tree branch to keep his balance. He was never this clumsy, so it had to be his injury.

"Hey, I'm really …"

"Don't apologize." Rage squeezed my hand and grinned. "This place is called Bloodshed for a reason."

"He's right. Besides, I've had way worse injuries." Damien hobbled, but his limp was already improving. "I heal fast, similar to a wolf, so don't worry."

When we stepped inside the apartment, a loud squeal filled the air. All of a sudden, a small body collided with mine. "I've missed you so much."

"I figured you'd be home." The break had flown by fast, and classes began once again the next day. "I've missed you too." I pulled my best friend even closer, hugging her back.

A door from Jess's room opened, and the all too familiar cotton candy scent infiltrated my nose. "I've died and gone to heaven. Did I miss the first kiss yet?"

Of course, Cole's mind would be in the gutter first thing. "Nope, you haven't."

"Hot damn." He clapped his hands and ran into the kitchen. "I know blood is my usual sustenance, but I think this situation calls for popcorn."

"I hate to tell you this, but I'm not down for my mate being with anyone else but myself." Rage pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head.

"In full transparency, I don't swing both ways." We hadn't been around Cole for weeks, and it's like he came back fully charged. "So, this whole conversation was pointless."

"Aw, are you having a Betty White moment?" Cole opened the

pantry and began shuffling through the shelves. “We may have a problem. There are no Snickers here. Alert. Alert. No Snickers.”

“I don’t think I can handle this right now?” Damien began inching toward the door.

“If you leave now, there’s no telling what might happen to you tonight while you sleep.” Cole wagged his eyebrows.

“He’s been in rare form, waiting on you three.” Jess shrugged and yawned. “You have no clue what I had to endure.”

“I think I may have a clue.” He was always a handful, so it wasn’t hard to imagine. “But he did pick up on me being hangry, which was one hundred percent accurate. “We just got through training and are now ready to cook some pizzas.”

“Oh, I’m so craving Slice Pizzeria.” Jess jumped up and down. “Let’s go out while we still can.”

That didn’t sound so terrible. I’d rarely been off-campus, so doing something in town wouldn’t be bad. “I’m good with that.”

“Alright, let’s go.” Cole pulled out his keys and swung them in the air. “First one there drives the Audi.”

Dear gods, no. I didn’t know if I could handle his driving again. We all turned and raced out the door.

“There is no way in hell that’s going to happen.” Jess’s wings magically appeared, not even tearing her clothes. They were a translucent silver with magic dust sparkling in the air all around them. She began flapping her wings and vanished from sight almost instantly.

“Did you see that?” My eyes had to be playing tricks on me.

“Yes.” Rage stood there blinking. “I can’t say I was expecting that.”

“Well, I’m pretty sure we don’t have a chance of winning.” Jess was sure full of surprises. She kept me on my toes.

“Nope, so I say we just take our time.” Rage opened the door and bowed. “After you, mi’ lady.”

“We’re being formal now?” When he did stuff like that, it made me swoon. Although I could never let him know willingly. I slipped past him, entering the hall.

“Just need to treat my mate with the love and respect she deserves.” He placed his hand on the small of my back and guided me toward the elevators.

“Uh, oh. What did you do?” I loved giving him a hard time.

“If you’re that suspicious of me, then I haven’t been giving you the proper attention you really need.” He grabbed my waist, pulling me in until I pushed against him. “Maybe I should remedy that right now.”

“Promises, promises.” My body came alive, and I needed his lips on mine.

He lowered his lips to mine, and his tongue teased, asking for

entrance. I moaned as I opened my mouth.

"Excuse me." The pretentious voice I'd hope to never hear again filled my ears.

Rage froze and pulled back with a growl. "What's your problem?"

"Two people frisking each other in the hallway. That's what." Ashley squared her shoulders and glared at me.

"Come on." She wasn't worth our time. She was miserable and only wanted to ruin our day. "The others are waiting on us anyway."

He sighed and took a step back, releasing me. "Fine, but we will continue this later."

"Of course." I ignored Ashley and passed her as she probably dreamed of my demise.

WITHIN MINUTES, we were out in the parking lot. Jess's wings had disappeared, and she flipped her hair over her shoulders. "Give me the keys, Cole. A challenge is a challenge."

"We've never seen your wings before though. Who knew how freakishly fast you are?" Cole clutched onto his keys like a toddler with his toys. "Had I known you were faster than me, I would've said the second person to the car would get to drive. So, really, you're at fault here."

"Just because I don't flaunt my abilities around like a peacock strutting his feathers doesn't mean that winning a challenge can be just ignored. Hand me the keys, now."

"I can't help that I'm amazing." Cole took a step back and shook his head no. "That shit just leaks out of me."

"At least that last statement was true." Jess placed both her hands on her hips. "Damien, tell him that I won fair and square."

Oh, gods. They were like an old married couple. At the very least, they were entertaining.

"She did." Damien shrugged and opened the passenger door. "So give her the damn keys before I decide to eat you."

"Vampire blood is exotic." Cole's face broke into a smirk. "But at least you'd die tasting something better than chocolate."

"You couldn't kill me even if you wanted to." Damien slid into the back seat and shut the door.

"Give her the damn keys." Rage groaned and walked around to the passenger side, opening the back door. He glanced at Cole. "You can ride up there with her. Raven and I will sit in the back with Damien."

"Fine." Cole threw the keys at Jess and pouted. "You better not mess her up."

Jess rolled her eyes and got in the driver's seat while I crawled in the back so I was sitting between Damien and Rage.

There was no telling what would happen in the next couple of hours.

Chapter Nineteen

As soon as we pulled back into the school parking lot, Rage and I were the first ones out. I couldn't believe all of the shenanigans that happened during our trip.

"Did you really have to pour your beer down my shirt?" Jess was still soaking wet from Cole's supposedly accidental fall.

"It wasn't on purpose." Cole grinned as he crawled out from behind the steering wheel. "Unfortunately, it was just too risky to let you drive back. What would've happened if a cop pulled us over and smelled all that on you?"

"I'm full, and I still can't handle this," Damien whispered to Rage and me. "I'm heading back to our place." He moved fast, gaining distance from us.

"You suck." Jess stomped and balled her hands into fists. "You pouted all the way there, and you pulled that stunt. You're just a piss poor loser."

"At least, I'm not the one smelling like piss." Cole arrogantly bobbed his head like that was the best comeback on the planet.

"Okay, it's over." The last thing we needed was Isadora catching wind of this. "Come on, Jess. Let's go back so you can take a shower."

"Fine, but only because you suggested it." She marched past us and headed straight for our dorm room.

"Well, that was fun." Cole chuckled as he watched Jess's dramatic exit.

"You're such a dick." Rage grabbed my hand, tugging me toward the girl's dorm.

"Oh, wow. You acted even worse than that before you shagged your mate." Cole followed behind us.

"Shagged? Really?" What, were we in an Austin Powers movie?

"You must be a pretty damn old vampire." Rage reached over and punched Cole in the side. "Hey, your jealousy is showing."

"Guys, stop." I paused and pointed at Cole. "You need to apologize to her. That was rude."

"Oh, please." Cole straightened his shoulders and crossed his arms. "She got even by telling those hot girls at the next table that I was the worst sex she's ever had." He shuddered. "I'm a great lay."

"I think someone protests a little too much." Rage laughed.

"Aw, Cole." I couldn't help but joke at his expense. He took every opportunity to take a shot at us. "Remember, size doesn't matter. You'll be okay."

"Hey, no." His mouth dropped and he placed a hand over his

heart. “I have a big penis.”

“Sure, that’s what they all say.” I reached over to pet his head.

“No.” He smacked my hand away and pointed at me. “I can show you.”

“You will not be showing my mate your package.” Rage lowered his head and glared. “That would end our friendship.”

“Ugh.” Cole stomped much like a toddler would. “That’s not fair and a low blow.”

“You know what?” Cole didn’t even appear to be attempting to leave, and having him around Jess could lead to even more drama. “Let’s go hang out at y’all’s place. We never do that.”

“I’m sure hanging out is what you mean.” Cole winked at me. “But remember vampires have good hearing.”

There were no off-limit topics with him. Sometimes, it was mind-blowing.

Rage tugged on my hand. “Jess probably needs to cool down anyway.”

“Fine, let’s go.” Cole took off, grumbling about women.

I CRINGED as I rushed into Professor Shaw’s classroom. I had gotten distracted by Rage’s lips, and now I was late to class.

He hadn’t entered the room yet, so some weight seemed to fall from my shoulders as I slipped into my seat.

“Gah, I was hoping you left school or something.” The vampire hissed and scooted her seat farther away from me. “You are a menace, to begin with.”

“Now, now.” Professor entered the room and obviously heard what she said. “This class will be one of respect for each other, or you’ll have to answer to Isadora.”

Whispers filled the room. No one wanted to mess with the headmaster.

“Now quiet.” He slammed a hand on his desk as he scowled. “One more interruption, and I’ll take matters into my own hands.”

The room quieted, and the vampire scowled in my direction.

“Okay, good.” He grabbed a marker and headed to the board. “Today we’re going to learn a topic that is beginning to get attention and debate. Anyone want to guess what it is?”

“World hunger?” One of the vampires chuckled at his own joke.

“No, not that.” Professor Shaw glanced around the class once again. “Anyone else want to take a guess?”

The class remained quiet, and he nodded his head. “Okay, it’s the topic of hybrid creatures.”

“What’s that?” Someone shouted from the back.

“The less technical term is half breeds.” Professor Shaw’s eyes landed on me.

I hadn’t even considered that was a possibility. When I was back home, we only associated with other wolf shifters. My mate was a wolf shifter.

“There are a few people out there who don't respect the ideology that they should only mate, consummate with, or date their own kind. It’s a growing epidemic that will have adverse consequences on our society.”

“How would it be bad?” The question left my mouth before I could stop it. However, even though the concept was foreign to me, I still needed to understand why it was bad.

“Having two paranormal sides fighting against each other would leave them unbalanced or worse.” He sighed and glanced at the ground.

I shuddered at the thought. No one should ever feel remotely like I had with my wolf. If I had those issues while being only a wolf shifter, I’d hate to put someone in an even worse position.

I RUSHED THROUGH THE WOODS, needing to get to the clearing as fast as possible. Rage had distracted me this morning, which caused the predicament I was in now. Thoughts of his naked body filled my mind, and I lost my footing, stumbling.

Shit, Damien was going to kill me. He was laid back about most things, but tardiness was not tolerated. We’d been practicing combat for the last few months now that my wolf was in control. The flowers bloomed all around, and the air was fragrant like the perfume area of a mall.

When I reached the clearing, there was no Damien though. Just an empty space with grass and some dandelions. There was definitely going to be hell to pay. He’d make sure of it.

I leaned back against a tree, hating that he gave up on me. Sometimes Rage wanted me to be late since Damien had banned him from our training sessions. As soon as something happened and I got hurt, Rage would lose his shit. Now Rage would shift and run on the other side of the woods so I could reach him easily if I needed him.

There was no point moping out here. Might as well turn around and face the music. I pushed off the tree when I heard a rustling behind me. “Damien?” Maybe he was just running late.

Instead of an answer, there was even more rustling of the trees. “I’m sorry I’m late.”

Paws began hitting the ground as a large black wolf came into view. Its eyes were locked on me, and it growled, baring its teeth.

I'm surprised he would do this to me, but last time, he'd mentioned that I was getting better. "Are you lost?"

The wolf growled louder and pawed at the ground, growing even more agitated. It began running toward me at full speed.

Not sure what else to do, I shifted into my wolf so we were at least on an even playing field. I growled, knowing I couldn't stand down. Any sign of submission would make it an uneven playing field.

Raven, I just ran into Damien. He told me that you called off training and he was coming to check on you.

The black wolf leapt into the air, and I rolled underneath it, barely escaping its sharp claws. Somehow, knowing that this wasn't one of Damien's training sessions made me nervous.

Are you okay? Rage's voice raised a notch since it was filled with concern.

There's a black wolf attacking me. I didn't have time to chat him up. The wolf was stalking toward me once more.

What do you mean black wolf? Where are you? I could already tell he was running in my direction.

The wolf began to change into human form. Once the black faded into red hair, I knew exactly who it was.

Ashley. It's Ashley.

"Did you really think you'd get away with this?" Ashley's face just about matched the shade of her hair. "Rage will be mine once more when I get through with you, and I'll finally earn my way to the top."

A loud growl ripped through my connection with Rage, and I knew he was going to get pissed when I shut it off. Still, if I was going to survive this until he got here, I was going to need all my concentration. As I locked down our connection, I felt him fighting the close.

"Are you fucking talking to him right now?" Ashley approached me, and her hands shook with rage. "Stop it. It took three years for them to notice me. You just waltz in here, and in less than a year, you've made it to where I am. That's not acceptable."

Them? It sounded like she was referring to more than just Rage.

Her bones broke as the shift began to overtake her once more. Now I had to at least get a shot in.

I rushed toward her and bit into her arm, holding on tight and fighting against her change.

She growled and rolled over on top of me, making my teeth rip open her skin.

Sensing the perfect opportunity, she went for my neck, but I was able to buck her off before her teeth could sink in.

Not wasting a moment, she charged me again, her eyes revealing her target. She was going for my chest, a fast kill location for a wolf.

Damien said the eyes were a tell, and this cemented his lessons in my head.

Within a foot of her reaching me, I lowered my whole body, making her flip over and land on her back.

A bear roared off in the distance, alerting me that both Damien and Rage were on their way. Somehow, my confidence began to kick in.

As she flipped back over onto her feet, her eyes were not only filled with hatred but anger as well. Instead of attacking me face-on, calculatingly, she circled me, taking her time.

I had to be the one who ended this. As I struck her paw, she turned around and clenched her teeth in my side, using her large canines to tear deeply into my skin.

Her bite burned, and blood began pouring from the wound. I had gotten too confident, and she took full advantage.

A huge smile spread across her snout, and she charged again, aiming for my other side.

If I didn't get a strike in now, it was going to be all over for me. I quickly moved back so her mouth only caught air, and I jumped fast, biting into the back of her neck. I bit hard, hanging on as she tried to buck me off. Her blood poured into my mouth and down her neck.

After a few minutes, she rammed me into a tree, making me lose my grip. The sound of paws crashing through the forest filled my ears. Both Rage and Damien would be here in a matter of seconds.

She must have heard them as well because she hunkered and charged me once more. At the last second, she jumped, aiming straight for my throat.

I stood on my back paws, and my front came down on her once more. This time, my teeth locked into the side of her neck, and I shook my head, making my grasp on her lock.

A whimper escaped her, but I held on tight. At the end of the day, I didn't want to kill her, but if I didn't, she'd come back for me again. Her intent had been clear with this whole set up; she'd planned on killing me. Still, did I want to be like her? When I felt her body weaken, I let go, and she slumped onto the ground.

Rage burst into the clearing with a loud howl. His eyes were completely feral as he took in the scene. When he saw that it was Ashley lying there in a pool of her own blood, his wolf seemed to relax. He walked over to me and nuzzled my head. *You got hurt.*

It's fine. I nuzzled him back, needing him. Since we weren't members of the same pack, we could only mind link in wolf form.

A big grizzly bear entered the clearing, and his eyes went straight to me.

He was worried about you too. Rage licked the spot where I was

bleeding.

I just want to go back to the dorm and rest. Today had been one hell of a day, and I wanted it to end now.

Ashely didn't move as she laid soaking in her blood. The only proof she was alive was the beating heart we could all still hear.

Let's get you home. Rage locked eyes with Damien, nodding his head toward Ashley. *Damien can finish the job.*

No, I don't want to stoop to her level. Just because I was here at Bloodshed Academy didn't mean we had to shed more blood than absolutely necessary.

Give me a second. Rage jogged over to Damien, and they did some weird kind of signals.

It was odd that they had their own kind of sign language when they were both in their animal form.

Needing some rest, I laid on the ground, letting the sun hit me. I needed to get to my room and clean my wounds sooner rather than later.

There was some ruffling and then nails tore into my back. Teeth cut into me close to my throat.

A loud growl filled the air as Rage began running toward me, trying to help me. However, my vision was going black. Dammit, if I didn't get her off me now, I was going to die. She started tugging hard, attempting to rip my throat out.

I did the only thing I could do. I stood on my hind legs and pushed back, making her fall underneath me, cushioning my landing. Her teeth let go as she whined in pain.

That bitch was still trying to kill me when she was at death's doorstep. I turned around and sunk my teeth into her neck. She had lost her chance for my mercy. I yanked back, and she began bleeding out.

Chapter Twenty

Isadora paced in front of her dark wooden desk as Damien, Rage, and I sat in her office chairs. She'd been notified by Damien of what had happened. He brought her to the clearing, and when she found the dark black wolf, it was clear she knew who it was immediately.

"How do I explain this to her parents?" Isadora frowned and took a deep breath.

"People know students have died here." Rage shrugged, obviously not upset by what happened in the slightest. "So this shouldn't come as a shock to them."

"Mr. Jackson, I understand that her death was justified." She glanced at the bite marks on my neck. "But handling students' dying is still not the norm."

"Can't we tell them something that would make them proud?" I hated to think of what my parents would do if they received news like this. Honestly, I felt horrible for what I'd done.

"You're wanting her death to be recorded as one of honor?" Damien blinked repeatedly, and his forehead wrinkled. It seemed like he was staring at a ghost instead of me.

"Why not?" I crossed my arms. This wasn't about making Ashley a martyr but about helping her family through a rough time. "Say she protected me from a rogue wolf or something."

"That could work." The headmaster stopped and stared at me. "It would give the school plausible deniability and let her family have peace."

"Rage, do something." Damien shook his head in disbelief. "She was a fucking psycho."

"Look, I'm not happy about it either. Hell, it's partly my fault for leading her on." He stood up from the chair and clenched his hands into fists. "But if that's what Raven wants and the bitch stays dead, then I'll do whatever will make her happy."

"Do you agree, Mr. Weston?" Isadora tapped her foot on the ground. "You're the last one who needs to agree."

"Fine, whatever." Damien stood and nodded. "If that's what Raven wants, I'll go with it."

Isadora startled from his submission, but her neutral expression quickly returned. "Very well. I'll take care of the body. Now you are all dismissed."

Thank the gods it didn't take long. Being around her really gave me the chills.

I followed both Rage and Damien out of the room. When I reached

the threshold, Isadora's voice stopped me in my tracks. "Ms. Wright, a word please."

Rage took a step back toward the door, but I held up a finger. "Just give me a moment, please."

"Fine, but I'm staying right here." Rage frowned and leaned against the wall.

"Okay." I shut the door and took a few steps back into the room.

"Never did I imagine that Cole, Damien, or Rage would allow their hearts to be given to anyone outside their group." Isadora placed a hand on one of the chairs we had just vacated and seemed to try to look through me.

"Well, Rage and I are true mates." Our bond trumped everything.

"I know that, but he's not the only one who loves you."

A coldness ran through my body. "No, you're wrong. They don't love me like that."

"Love is a funny thing." Isadora tilted her head as she examined me, reminding me of the way Professor Shaw had looked at me in class. "Maybe they don't love you the same way Rage does, but they still love you just as much. Somehow, you've gotten the elite three that were unattainable."

"I never meant to …"

She raised a hand out in front of her chest. "I know you didn't mean for it to happen. But let me be clear." Her eyes turned cold, and she scowled in my direction. "You better not cause any more trouble, or it won't be only you that pays."

Her threat was clear, and I refused to show how much it affected me. "Understood." I turned and exited the room.

When I stepped outside, Rage pushed off the wall and growled. "That bitch spelled the room so we couldn't hear."

"It's fine." What I needed at the moment was for him to keep his shit together. There's no telling what he would do if he had heard our conversation.

"Dude, keep it together." Damien punched him in the shoulder. "Let's get out of here before you do something stupid."

I was pretty sure Rage wasn't going to listen, but eventually, he turned, and we walked out of the building.

"What happened back there?" Rage stopped and gently grabbed my hand, turning me toward him.

I didn't want to chance Isadora overhearing us. "Let's go to my room."

"There's my people." Cole strolled out of the cafeteria and grinned. "Do you know how horrible it was to go in there? Those people are fake wannabes. I can't surround myself with that negative energy."

"Dude, can you shut the hell up?" Damien ran a hand through his

hair and sighed. “I can’t deal with you right now.”

“What the hell is wrong with you?” Cole slowly glanced at each one of us before his face turned serious. “What happened?”

“Not here, and not now.” I tugged on mine and Rage’s joined hands. The four of us together began the trek to the dorm.

WHEN WE ENTERED THE DORM, we found Jess pacing in the middle of the floor. She sighed when she saw me. “Girl, I was worried. The school just alerted us that Ashley died protecting someone from a rogue wolf, and I knew that shit wasn’t true.” She ran over to me and threw her arms around me, hugging me hard. “I knew that was bullshit. She’s not noble. I was so worried she attacked you.”

“I’m fine.” My heart sank at what I was going to have to tell her. I hadn’t been able to fully process it yet. So I wasn’t sure how I felt about my own actions, let alone having to tell Jess. “But she did attack me.”

“Whoa. Whoa. Whoa.” Cole pulled me from Jess’s arms. “That bitch attacked you?” He watched Damien and Rage as they sat on the couch. “Tell me one of you killed her. ’Cause if not, I’m going to bring her back to life so I can kill her.”

“No, we didn’t.” Damien’s eyes gleamed with pride.

“Then what happen—” Cole stopped, and his eyes landed on me. “You did it.”

I averted his gaze and glanced at my feet. This wasn’t something I wanted to talk about.

“Did what?” Jess wasn’t processing it as fast as Cole was.

Rage must have known how I was feeling because he came over and wrapped his arm around my waist. “Ashley had dropped a note off at our place for Damien. She told him that she wasn’t going to be able to practice with him today and signed it Raven.”

“But Raven went to training today.” Jess’s face somehow turned even a shade paler than normal.

“She was waiting for me.” Somehow those words pushed past my lips.

“Wait …” Jess took a step back and shook her head. “You’re saying Ashley attacked you.”

“She wanted me dead.” That was blatantly clear. What I did was in self-defense, but my stomach turned queasy at what I’d done.

“Raven killed her out of self-defense.” Rage pulled me into his chest and ran a hand through my hair. “It was either you or her. Remember that. You didn’t go up there to kill her. She intended to kill you.”

“Then why the hell did the school make it sound like she was a

hero?" Jess's eyes flashed with anger.

"I came up with the idea." She didn't need to blame anyone else but me.

"Why would you do that?" Cole now joined in the conversation. His tone was cold. The one that he reserved for everyone else except those in this room. "Now she sounds like a fucking saint."

"To give her family peace and to give the academy a good story where Bloodshed doesn't look bad." Also, to make myself feel better, but that felt too selfish to admit.

"This can't leave the room." I needed to make sure each one of them understood. "If it does, Isadora will make our life hell."

"She already does." Cole rolled his eyes. "I'm not scared of her though."

"She's not trying now, and she's already a pain in the ass." Damien leaned back and shivered. "Imagine if she actually tried for once."

"If Raven doesn't want us to say anything, then we won't." Rage kissed my forehead and tugged me toward the bathroom. "What you need to do is go take a shower and get some rest. I'll go back and deal with them while you just relax."

I wanted to laugh at those words, but my insides were turning cold. "Okay."

He started the shower and cranked the heat up. "There, it's getting warm." He grabbed my waist and pulled me against him again. "This was not your fault. She chose to attack you. You did it out of self-preservation. You did absolutely nothing wrong. Don't let the guilt eat you alive." He kissed my lips and let go. "I love you."

It was strange because even though I knew that fact, he had never said the words aloud to me until now. "I love you too."

A sweet smile spread across his face, and he opened the bathroom door. "I'll meet you in your room in a few minutes."

Now that I was alone in the bathroom, I turned to see my reflection in the mirror. Ashley's bite marks were just about gone, and my face was almost as pale as Jess's fae complexion. It was comforting to see that I didn't look any different. There wasn't any darkness clear on my face.

I stepped into the bathroom and let the scalding water try to penetrate my mind's fog. I began washing myself but got lost in my thoughts. I kept reminding myself what I did was the right thing. She wasn't going to stop, not until either she or I was dead. She had let hatred and greed fill her heart.

As I stepped out of the tub and got dressed, it hit me that I would be okay. At the end of the day, I did what had to be done. Although that didn't mean I had to like it or be proud of my actions. There was no right or wrong answer, there was just an answer—one.

There were murmurs in the den. All four of them having hushed conversations, and it was comforting. Every one of them had my back, so I was going to take Rage's advice and get some sleep.

When I entered my bedroom, I didn't even bother turning on the lights. It made no difference to my vision anyway. As I crawled into my bed, something crinkled on my pillow.

I don't remember ever leaving anything there. I grabbed a piece of paper that was folded in half, opening it to see a clear, crisp font forming letters that I had to look over multiple times until it made sense.

Raven,

We've been watching you. Now we know you're Elite material. Our mission is secret, but very important. The very essence of our beliefs centers around improving the vitality of our supernatural society. To do this, we need strong leaders who can make hard decisions. If you decide you'd like to be part of this mission, leave a response at the place you took Ashley's life.

Do not tell anyone, or there will be severe consequences.

-The Elites

My breath caught, and my head seemed to spin. Was this some sort of test by Isadora? I wasn't sure what to do. My eyes became heavy, and I tucked the note between the mattress and box spring. I didn't have to make a decision right now. I just needed sleep.

The End

BOOK 2

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Chapter One

Flashes of the past surrounded me. Fall was upon us, but the memory of my teeth sinking into Ashley's neck and the warm metallic taste of her blood filling my mouth made my eyes water. Even the way her body had looked as she took her last breath would always torment me. I'd killed out of self-preservation but having blood on my hands left me tainted.

Apparently, that made me worthy of The Elites. The letter that had been left on my pillow haunted me. At this point, I had the damn thing memorized, so I wasn't sure why I even brought it with me.

Just thinking about it had the words appearing behind my closed eyelids.

Raven,

We've been watching you. Now we know you're Elite material. Our mission is secret but very important. The very essence of our beliefs centers around improving the vitality of our supernatural society. To do this, we need strong leaders who can make hard decisions. If you decide you'd like to be part of this mission, leave a response at the place you took Ashley's life.

Do not tell anyone, or there will be severe consequences.

-The Elites

"Raven, you're thinking about it again, aren't you?" Rage wrapped his muscular arm around me, his earthy scent filling my nose. He was my mate, the perfect other half to complete me. His shaggy brown hair had grown out a little more, and his chocolate eyes could undo me with just a look. The fact that he was so damn muscular and hot as hell was just an added bonus.

"Oof, you got some boney hips." Damien groaned as I snuggled even more into Rage's embrace.

The backseat was awfully small when I had a large man sitting on either side of me.

"I told her to sit up here with me, but you wouldn't have it." Cole glanced in the windshield mirror and stared straight at Rage. "She'd be safer up here than stuck between you two big cubs." His blue eyes began to sparkle, and even though his window was down, his perfectly styled blond hair didn't move at all. He loved giving Rage and Damien a hard time about their size because he was the smallest

in both build and height than the other two.

Damien pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his golden eyes. “Wolves aren’t considered cubs.” It was always funny to watch Damien, the largest of all three and built like a freaking ford truck, put up with Cole’s smart mouth. He ran his free hand through his short auburn hair.

“I know. That’s why I called you that.” Cole grinned like he was proud of his accomplishment.

“People who put down others are trying to overcompensate for something.” Jess’s long ash blonde hair fell over her shoulder as she tilted her head. “So, what are you trying to overcompensate for?” Her violet eyes glowed. She was a force to be reckoned with despite her petite, waif-like frame.

“Me? Pfft.” Cole lifted his hand and waved it down his body. “This is absolute perfection in all ways and forms.”

It was odd to me that a vampire was so bubbly. If he’d heard me call him that, he’d probably have killed me.

“Don’t get all high and mighty just because you’re driving.” Jess leaned back in her seat. “Our first drive together, you almost killed us. One wrong move and it’s over.”

“Yeah, right.” Cole chuckled. “What’s a short fae like you going to do?”

She grinned and lifted her fingers, causing the car to reduce its speed. “Next time, I’ll stop it completely.”

Jess was one of my best friends. Well, to be fair, everyone in this car was one of my best friends. Somehow, even though I had never dreamed of going to the school Bloodshed Academy, I got three of the closest friends I’d ever had and a fucking awesome mate. “How about both of you stop before someone gets killed?”

“They bicker like an old married couple. Do you think that’s going to happen?” Rage arched a brow at me, and my heart kicked up a notch.

“Next time we stop, Damien can sit up front with Cole.” Then, Jess wouldn’t have to deal as much with his near-constant ramblings and chatter.

“What did I ever do to deserve your hate?” Damien clutched his heart before an evil smirk appeared. “Don’t worry. Your next training session will be my revenge.”

Thankfully that wouldn’t be for a few days yet. We were heading back to Clarksville, Tennessee to visit with my parents and other pack members for a night. I’d been extremely nervous about this because I knew my Mom would want to know what had happened to my crescent-shaped moon necklace once she saw my pendant from Rage. I hadn’t seen my parents in over a year, because at Christmas break, I

wasn't allowed to leave campus. Since I hadn't been in sync with my wolf, it was too risky to let me leave and visit family.

I'd been in a funk ever since I killed Ashley, so Rage talked the headmaster into letting us travel back to my home for the night. Her only stipulation was that her three most trusted students had to go with me, which so happened to be my mate and the other two knuckleheads in the car. Jess had refused to be left behind since all her 'peeps' were tagging along with me. Honestly, I felt the best when I was around the four of them anyways. They'd turned into more than friends—family.

"If you hurt her, I'll kick your ass." Rage glowered at him. "Bear shifter or not, I can take down your six hundred pound ass." That was the only point of contention that he had with Damien. Damien had been training me to fight, and every time I'd come home with even a little scratch or bruise, Rage got angry.

"First off, I'm only six hundred pounds when I'm in my bear form." Damien shook his head and met Rage's gaze. "And secondly, be glad I'm training her or she wouldn't be sitting here at this moment."

That was a low blow, but it was a fact. Ashley had wanted me dead for many reasons, but the main one was Rage himself. She had wanted him, and it grossed me out to think about his and her physical relationship before I came to Bloodshed. I couldn't hold it against him. It wasn't like I was pure either. Still, because of Damien, I had been able to protect myself.

"Fine, but no revenge." Rage's hand tightened around my waist.

To be fair, Rage had a nightmare of his own that night. He saw me at the brink of death. It was something we were both getting through. Not something that would be quick and easy either. It was going to take time.

As we pulled into my parents' driveway, I wasn't sure if coming back was the right thing. My parents knew I was dating someone, much to their chagrin, but not to the full extent of finding my true mate. They were hoping Greg and I would make up and get back together. After all, he was going to be the future alpha of our pack. For some reason, I always had a hard time letting them down. However, today, that was all going to change.

We all climbed out of the car just as the front door swung open and both my parents rushed outside. When their eyes landed on the four people that traveled with me, they paused.

"Mom." Cole cooed and strolled straight up to her, pulling her into a hug.

Mom's body stiffened, but she was too shocked to resist the hug.

She wrapped her thin arms around the vampire. Then she jerked back realizing who and what he was.

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Dad's dark brown eyes narrowed, and his fists clenched at his sides. "You're the one who took her away from us, and now you're hugging my wife?"

"In all fairness, I was instructed to do that by the headmaster." Cole threw both hands in the air like he was surrendering.

"Sorry, I didn't know everyone was coming with me." If I didn't intervene my Dad might try to kill the annoying vampire. "Rage was coming originally, but the headmaster required that ding-a-ling," I said as I pointed to Cole, "and my instructor to come too."

Rage appeared next to me, taking my hand in his.

"Instructor?" Mom's blue eyes raked scathingly over Damien. "First off, he's a bear shifter and isn't that old either."

"Yes, I'm still a student, but I've helped other struggling shifters, so Isadora thought that I'd be the best fit for her." Damien stepped next to me on my other side.

"And I came along because I'm her best friend." Jess appeared next to Damien, her grin wide.

"If we are imposing on you, we can find somewhere else to stay." Rage squeezed my hand.

"No, no." Mom stepped back into the house and held the door open. "Of course, you're all welcome to stay."

Dad openly scowled at Rage's and my joined hands. "But there will be a girls and boys room."

"Of course." Cole smiled and gave a quick glance in Rage's direction. "I'm sure we'll all follow that rule."

"Let's go in." Cole was goading Rage, and now wasn't the time for it. "I need something to drink anyway."

Luckily, I could count on Jess to help me out. "Hell, yeah. I wanna see what your room looks like."

"Excuse me?" Dad cleared his throat.

"I've got this." Cole smirked at Dad. "She said, 'hell, yeah …'"

"I know exactly what she said." Dad crossed his arms, and a vein in his neck popped to the surface. "Although that's not proper language from a lady."

"Oh …" Cole waved his hands and shook his head. "Your first mistake was thinking she is a lady."

"You jackass." Jess placed her hands on her hips.

Cole leaned toward Dad as if he was telling him a secret. "See. My point is proven."

I should've known Cole wouldn't filter himself even with my parents. Honestly, that's one reason why I loved him. He was who he was, and he wouldn't be someone else just to please others. "So we're

here." I walked into the house with Rage and the others close behind me. Dad finally entered the room as he stared all of us down.

The stairs were right in front of the door, but I turned left, heading into the living room. The television was on but muted. I headed to the worn, beige couch in the center as Rage and Damien sat beside me. Jess and Cole headed over to the matching loveseat while mom made her way to the recliner. Dad chose to stand, leaning on the wall behind mom's chair.

"I'm sorry if we came off rude, but we weren't expecting anyone else with Raven." Mom smiled at my friends and sighed. "It's overwhelming since we haven't seen our baby in a while, and for her to show up with four other people … strangers…"

"Don't worry." Jess returned her smile. "We'll make sure you get adequate alone-time with your daughter. I'm sure that the three bozos and I will find something to entertain us."

"So you're the one that my daughter is dating?" Dad frowned in Rage's direction.

"Paul …" Mom glanced over her shoulder, giving him one of her infamous looks.

Luckily, I had warned Rage that my parents didn't know that we were mates. I was afraid it would hurt his feelings, but it didn't. He understood that my parents were already having a hard time adjusting to me being at Bloodshed, but he hoped that I'd tell them soon. I needed to and planned to do it on this trip, especially since they kept bringing up Greg every time we talked.

"You know y'all could've come to see me." It upset me that they had refused to visit me on campus when they knew I couldn't come home.

"Oh, we know honey." Mom glanced at the carpet and picked at her fingernails. "But with you struggling so much with your wolf, we didn't think it would be wise."

I wanted to say, "Maybe it would've helped," or, "Maybe if you hadn't given me the necklace, I wouldn't have struggled," but it wouldn't have changed anything. At the end of the trip, I wanted to have enjoyed my short two days stay here.

A knock on the door made the room eerily quiet.

"I'll go get it." Dad hurried out of the room like he couldn't get away fast enough.

Mom bit her bottom lip, which was her tell, a definite sign for when she was unsure about something. Right as I was about to ask what was wrong, I heard an all too familiar voice.

"Hey, Paul. It looks like our special girl is back." Jerry's voice echoed all around the room.

If he was here, that also meant …

“I’d love a chance to talk to her when she has a second.” Greg’s tone was overly arrogant even from where I sat.

Rage tensed beside me. I squeezed his hand, trying to give comfort.

“Yeah, she’s right in here.” Dad appeared unsure, but he couldn’t refuse his alpha.

“I guess that vamp must have brought her here,” Greg muttered as they shuffled into the living room. Greg stopped in his tracks.

His dark brown eyes appeared black as he took in my hand joined with Rage’s. “What the hell?” His usual boyish good looks were a gave way to something darker.

“What my son meant to say is hello.” Jerry gave his son a warning glance and then turned to face everyone in the room. “We’ve been missing Raven badly. So, when we saw the red Audi parked out there, we just had to stop in.” Greg looked like an exact replica of Jerry when he was younger. “To be honest, we weren’t expecting a houseful of guests or we wouldn’t have barged in.”

“It’s no bother.” Mom laughed and stood. “We weren’t expecting a full house either, but I’m so glad they came. It’s nice to meet her friends.”

“How am I not surprised that you guys are together?” Greg scowled in Rage’s direction. “Let me guess. You guys started dating right after I left?”

The room became silent, but Rage met his eyes. “You will not talk to her that way.”

“Like hell I won’t.” Greg stiffened, and his eyes landed on me. “She will be mine again.”

That was all it took for Rage to come unhinged. “Let me be clear. She will never be yours.” He stood and quickly hurried over. He towered over Greg, staring him down. “You will respect her and realize you’ve lost her forever.”

“Hey now.” Jerry pushed his son a few steps back and placed himself between them. “You can’t come here and disrespect my son. This is our pack, not yours.” He turned to his son and pointed. “And you, behave yourself.”

Cole chuckled and leaned back in his seat. “This is going to be fun.”

Jerry’s eyes flashed as he took in the vampire. “Listen, bloodsucker, we don’t need any help from you.”

“If you expect respect, dog, then you need to learn to give it, too.” Cole’s voice turned cold, and he got to his feet, narrowing his eyes.

“Stop it.” This couldn’t be happening within the first few minutes of the visit. I could have bet my parents and Jerry had planned for Greg to talk to me so we could get back to what we were before

Bloodshed. They hadn't expected four other people to be with me, let alone my mate. "Let's just clear this all up." No one could deny true mates. I turned and looked directly into Greg's eyes. "We will never be getting back together."

"Never?" Jerry huffed. "That's a big statement."

Rage's jaw clenched, and his breathing increased.

I couldn't imagine what he was feeling. If I were him, I probably would've lost it by now. Thinking of someone pursuing him made me crazy. It wasn't fair to him, so I had to fix this fast. "It is, and that's why I'm clarifying." I took Rage's hand in mine and squeezed it ever so lightly. "He is my true mate."

"What?" Mom's voice was barely a whisper. However, it wasn't a look of surprise she was giving me. It was one of defeat.

"True mates don't exist anymore." Greg crossed his arms, ready to fight.

"Do you think you have a chance?" Cole stalked predatorily toward Greg as if he was prey.

"You always treated her like crap anyway." Jess shook her head and wrinkled her nose. "It was appalling."

"I did not." Greg glanced at Jess. "See, this is the kind of lies she's been fed the whole time at the academy."

"Stop it," Damien growled deep, and he appeared on my other side glaring at Jerry. "They are true mates, end of story. So what exactly are you trying to accomplish by being here?"

"She's part of my pack." Jerry lifted his head and straightened his shoulders. "We wanted to visit, and my son has been missing her."

"You'll find that we give zero fucks about a disillusioned asshole that's pissed off because a girl doesn't want to be his anymore." Cole smirked and tilted his head.

"Alright, that's enough." Dad's face had a hint of red. "You," he pointed at Greg, "started this whole mess with your comments."

"I told him he was out of line." Jerry's angry voice was clear despite the growls in it.

"My daughter wouldn't lie." Dad focused on Jerry. "If she says they're true mates, then they are. End of discussion."

"But she's young and naïve …"

"Don't make this worse than it needs to be." Mom clenched her hands into fists, and there was some kind of silent exchange between her and Jerry. "It's best if you all leave."

To say I was stunned would be an understatement. She had just told her alpha what to do.

"Fine, but we will need to discuss this later." Jerry turned and headed to the door.

"Dad, really?" Greg glanced at his dad then back to Rage.

“Yes, get your ass moving.” Jerry’s voice was a low growl as he opened the front door.

“This isn’t over.” Greg glanced at me with narrowed eyes before turning and following his dad out the door.

“Your mom is awesome.” Cole’s eyes lit up, and he grinned. “Telling her alpha what to do.”

“That isn’t something to be happy about.” Mom sighed, and her shoulders sagged.

So many questions were swimming in my head. Why did Jerry, her alpha, listen to her? How was she able to speak to him that way? It felt as if Mom wasn’t telling me everything, possibly even hiding something.

Chapter Two

After dinner, I offered to help Mom with the dishes, hoping to get some time alone with her. I cleared the table and brought the dishes to the sink. “That should be about everything.”

“Thanks.” She gave me a small smile and grabbed another plate, rinsing it off. “At first, I was skeptical of your friends. But after spending time with them, I’ve changed my mind. I’m relieved you have them.”

Mom and I were similar in many ways. It was the ‘convincing Dad’ part that might take a minute. “Yeah, I’m lucky to have found them.” Of course, Cole had entertained us throughout dinner. He told the many stories of our adventures and how he was the hero in every situation. Tonight though, I’d felt more complete than ever before. It was a strange feeling.

“Besides, even if I wanted to not believe you, after seeing you and Rage together, every doubt has been removed from my mind.” Mom's eyes got a little watery, but she bent down to load the dish in the dishwasher to hide them.

“It’s not something I’d ever lie about.” It burned me that she had even considered that I might be lying. I’d always been honest with her.

She huffed and grabbed another plate. “Honey, I’m sorry. It’s just that school can change someone.”

“How could you even know that?” It pissed me off that she thought I was going to change so easily.

“Remember, I’m from New Orleans.” Mom diverted her eyes away and grabbed a sponge to help remove some stuck-on food. “We see things every now and then.”

It was hard to remember where mom grew up sometimes since we had lived here my whole life. “Well, either way. I’m not going to change that drastically.”

“I’m sure you and Rage will keep each other grounded.”

“Honey?” Dad walked into the room and over to us. “How I’ve missed this sight. Both my girls are here taking care of things.”

“I’ve missed it too.” Mom bumped into my arm.

“Cole, he’s sure something.” Dad shook his head and chuckled.

“He’s definitely full of life.” Cole had always kept us on our toes, and Jess wasn’t very far behind him.

“That’s one way to put it.” Dad sighed and placed a hand on my arm. “You weren’t kidding earlier, right?”

“You’re late to that convo.” Mom laughed. “She already confirmed

it was true."

"Well, I don't know much about him, but he sure seems to take care of you." He sighed and glanced toward the door that led into the living room where my friends were. "I have a feeling you'll be leaving our pack."

To be honest, I hadn't even thought about that yet. Rage and I could speak in our wolf forms together, but not in our human forms. That was the thing with mates, if you were members of the same pack, you could mind speak regardless of form. "I don't think there could be any way he'd join this pack, not with Greg leading." Now that I thought about it, I didn't think I could either.

"No, he'd challenge him or even Jerry." Dad leaned back against the kitchen wall.

"Alright, all done." Mom shut the dishwasher and patted my arm. "Let's go back and join them."

When we entered the room, Cole stood in the middle of the room. "That's how we all know Rage has the bigger dick."

Of course, he couldn't filter himself even a little bit. "I don't think I even want to know what's going on."

Cole spun around and gave me a thumbs up. "I was just saying that you must be happy that your mate is the one with a bigger …"

"Whoa, stop!" If he couldn't stop himself, I would. "My parents are right here."

"See, and you complained about me not being a lady." Jess rolled her eyes and plopped down on the love seat.

"Who can be a better lady than you are?" He pointed both thumbs at himself. "This guy."

"Oh, you're right." Jess grinned evilly and tossed her hair over her shoulder. "I forgot about that problem. But you're right, you make a damn good girl."

"No." Cole's smile vanished, and he shook his head. "Don't you dare start that shit again. I'm not a bad lay, and my dick is huge."

"Will you shut up?" Rage sighed and sat back on the couch. "Raven's parents are in the same room." He glanced at me and patted the empty spot next to him in the center.

"Mr. Wright gets it." Cole pointed at my Dad. "Don't you?"

Mom mashed her lips together, trying not to laugh.

"As much as I don't want to hear about my daughter's friends' genitalia, I'm sure she doesn't want to learn about my massive size either." My dad couldn't prevent the smile that tickled at the edge of his lips.

"Okay, that's enough." I went over to Rage, sitting next to him and Damien.

Damien groaned and glanced at me. "Why would Isadora do this to

me?"

"Speaking of which, let's go get ice cream." Jess stood and clapped her hands.

"Did you just applaud your idea?" Cole rubbed his chin with his thumb. "I'm going to have to steal that for my own."

"That's fine as long as you give me credit each time you do it." Jess winked at him and then turned to me.

"That sounds pretty good to me too." Damien popped his neck and stood. "Are you guys game?"

"You guys go on and have some fun." Mom moved into the foyer and grabbed her purse from where it was hanging on the coat hanger. She pulled out a twenty. "Bring me back a hot fudge sundae with all the fixings."

"And I'll take a peanut butter and banana milkshake." Dad spread his hands out. "The largest size they've got."

"I've got it, don't worry about it." Rage grabbed my hand and smiled at my parents. "Afterall, you've cooked us dinner and are letting us crash here for the night. It's the least we can do."

"Are you sure?" Mom held the money out.

"Rage is right." Damien opened the door and motioned for us to step out. "We've got this."

"Y'all be careful." Dad hollered as we all climbed in the car.

As usual, I got stuck in the back with Rage and Damien. I pretended it was a hardship, but that was the best seat in the car. "Alright, there is an ice cream shop not too far from here."

"No, no, no." Cole shut his car door and closed his eyes. "We drive around 'til we find something everyone agrees on."

"But there …"

"There is a process to be respected here." Cole pulled out of the driveway and turned right, heading to the exit from the subdivision.

I sighed, and Rage wrapped his arm around me. His voice was barely audible to me. "You should know better than to fight. Guide him where he thinks it's his idea, remember."

Damien smirked and nodded along.

Damn, he had good hearing. "Okay, Cole. Turn right up here."

"What did I say, Raven?" Cole glanced in his rearview mirror and narrowed his eyes. "Don't test the process." He then turned left, smirking the whole time.

Luckily, the shop was down this main road, so we'd be there any second. It was my favorite place to get ice cream or sweets. They had it all there.

"Look, I found the ice cream shop I want to stop at." Cole pointed at the Golly G's sign. He pulled into the parking lot. Immediately, I recognized Greg's and Sheila's vehicles.

I hadn't even thought about them being here. It was one of their regular hangout spots. "We could keep going."

"Nope, this is it." Cole opened the door, and Jess followed suit. "Come on."

I thought about fighting it more, but I knew I shouldn't let them being there change things. As I climbed out of the car, Rage grabbed my waist and pulled me against him. "Everything okay?"

My body began buzzing at our connection. "It is now." I grinned at him, and he laid his forehead on mine.

"I'm happy to oblige." He lowered his lips against mine with gentle pressure.

I reached around his neck and ran my fingers through his hair. The shop door opened, and an all too familiar voice called my name.

"Holy moly, is that Raven over there making out?" Sheila giggled. "She never did that with you, Greg."

"Oh, they're always doing that." Jess lowered her voice but said it loud enough for us to hear.

"At first it's unsettling." Cole sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "But it eventually becomes like a picture on the wall. It begins to just blend into the surroundings because it's always there. They're always being lovey-dovey or making kissy faces."

Rage's lips stilled on mine, and he barely pulled back. "Do we continue to ignore them or behave and go in?"

"You might want to go for an ending." Damien appeared next to us, and his body was tense. "We've got douchebags coming out."

"Yeah, she'll be crawling back to me." Greg snickered and pointed at me.

"You better not take her back." Ian's disdain was always evident in his voice. "She's giving up the milk for free. So you know he ain't buying that cow."

That was the final straw.

"What did you say, dickhead?" Rage pulled back, shooting daggers at Ian.

"Don't worry. I wasn't insulting you, just the bitch you're kissing." Ian snickered like he had said the funniest thing in the world.

"Are you an idiot or a moron?" Cole scowled at them and walked over to Ian. "I can't decide if either one of those titles best fits you."

"What the hell?" Ian straightened his shoulders and glared back.

"Personally, I think douchebag-moron fits the best." Jess tapped her index finger to her lips.

"I also like the simplicity of Rage's suggestion of dickhead," Cole muttered and looked up to the sky as if he was seeking divine intervention.

"Why don't you all go back to Bloodshed, and leave us the hell

alone?" Greg stepped in front of Ian, attempting to stare Cole down.

"Wait. Weren't you the guy who came and visited us?" Jess stepped next to Cole, staring the group down with him.

"Oh, it was him." Cole glanced at her and pointed at Greg. "You can't forget a cheap-ass suit like his."

Dear gods. This was only going to get worse, and I had no clue how to fix it. "Come on. Let's find a different ice cream shop."

"Oh, hell no," Damien spoke and glared straight at Greg. "We aren't going anywhere."

Now, I wasn't expecting that from Damien.

Rage leaned down and kissed my lips once again. "He's right. I'm going to go inside and buy my girl some ice cream. If anyone has a problem with it," Rage glanced at Greg then Ian, "then I'll handle it whatever way I see fit."

He intertwined his fingers with mine and pulled me toward the entrance. As we strolled by Greg and Ian, Rage paused. "Just to be clear, I belong to her in all ways. Get it through your thick skull."

"Don't be so sure." Greg bared his teeth and growled. "She was like that with me too, and look at where I am now."

"That's a bunch of bull, and you know it." Sheila laughed hard and smacked his arm. "She was never like that with you. I always wondered if she even liked you."

Greg took a step away from her and frowned. "You know that's not true. Why would you say that?"

"What?" Her forehead wrinkled, and her blue eyes widened. She grabbed a strand of her blonde hair and twirled.

"It's not true." Greg took a step toward her, getting in her face. "Tell them now."

Even though I never was a fan of Sheila, she didn't deserve to be treated like that. "Are you trying to bully her?" I untangled myself from Rage and headed in their direction. "Are you that fucking insecure?" I tugged Sheila away, getting in between her and Greg. "Why don't you recognize that you're pissed at me and stop taking it out on everyone else."

"Why don't you back away, bitch?" Ian stood next to Greg, and they both just stared me down.

That was possibly the worst thing he could do.

Within seconds, Rage and Cole were on both sides of me, and Damien flanked Cole. They were ready for action.

Ian startled, and Greg took a step back.

"Are you sleeping with all of them?" Ian's voice lacked malice now that all four of us were staring down at their group.

"Is that what you think would be happening for all three of us to want to protect her?" Cole tilted his head, his eyes as cold as ice. "If

that's how your pack operates, I'm damn glad I'm a vampire."

"Well, how else would she get three Bloodshed guys willing to fight for her?" Ian's voice wasn't filled with as much hatred, but he obviously didn't want to back down completely.

"It's called friendship." Jess stayed back with Sheila but still wanted her presence known.

"This has to end now." I took a step toward Greg and stared right into his eyes. "There is no chance of us getting back together ... ever. Rage is my true mate, so you need to get it through your head. I loved you once but only as a friend, nothing more. As of now, those feelings are disappearing quite quickly. We are done."

"You're fucking heartless to do this to him like this." Ian had always hated me. It was even more clear in this moment.

"You're the ones who came out here and started it." Rage stood next to me, our arms brushing.

"Don't worry." Greg smirked, examining me up and down, which made Rage growl. "She'll come back home when it's all said and done."

His unveiled threat rang true in my ears. He expected to be my alpha one day. "The only way I'd come back here is if you weren't in charge."

"Are you challenging me?" Greg's hands quivered in rage, and his eyes began to glow.

This was my parents' home so I couldn't do something that would cause them harm. "No, I'm saying if I come back, it won't be as part of your pack."

"Raven, be careful." Sheila sounded concerned for me.

Now that the words were out, it was clear. I didn't belong here. In fact, I had never felt a sense of comfort and unity as I did with my friends and mate.

"I'd listen to Sheila if I were you." Greg stood tall, but there was a hint of fear in his eyes that I'd never seen before. He was used to getting everything he wanted on a silver platter.

Everything was finally clear to me. I just hoped my parents would understand. "As of this moment, I'm no longer part of your pack."

"Hell, yeah." Cole threw his arm around me and laughed. "I've been wondering when that would happen."

A part of me turned cold with those words. It surprised me since I'd never even known that it was a part of my physical body. That was where my pack connection had been, and now it was gone. It felt empty.

"You're going to regret this." Greg pointed his finger at me and growled.

"I feel like that's all he ever says." Cole chuckled and glanced at

Rage. “How many times has he said that now?”

“Come on. Let’s get out of here.” Ian patted Greg on the back and motioned to the car. “She isn’t worth it.”

“Sheila, come on.” Greg used his authoritative, controlling tone.

“Uh … Okay.” Sheila stopped in front of me. “Thank you. We’ve never been super good friends, but I know you were standing up for me.”

“No problem.” This was the first time ever that she’d been nice to me. “Remember, you’re a person too. Don’t let him do that to you.”

“It’s easy for you to say.” She mashed her lips together and sighed. “My wolf already sees him as alpha.” She turned and followed after the two climbing into the back seat of the F-150.

“It’s never boring around you.” Damien’s eyes stayed on the truck until it turned on to the main road. “That’s for sure.”

“I know.” Cole chuckled and wrapped his arms around me. “That’s why she’s my bestie. I don’t know how I survived without her.”

“You bring your share of drama.” Jess rolled her eyes and sighed. “Let’s see. You slept with a ton of girls, and when they expected more than just sex, you made a mockery of them in front of everyone.”

“Hey, I’ve reduced the number recently.” Cole lifted his head like he was offended that she had brought up his past transgressions.

“True, but there are some crazies holding on to those last rays of hope that you’ll finally notice them.” Jess arched an eyebrow.

“Can we just get the damn ice cream we came for?” Damien groaned and moved to enter the store.

“A huge ice cream cone is sounding heavenly.” My stomach growled, reemphasizing the point. The last thing I wanted was everyone to focus on what I’d just done. I wasn’t ready to talk to them about it yet, so Cole diverting the attention relieved me.

“Y’all go on in, and we’ll be right there.” Rage tilted his head, but his eyes stayed on mine.

It was only a few seconds before we were alone.

He reached out, pushing a piece of hair behind my ear. “What are you going to do?”

There was no point in hiding it from him. “I don’t know.” I sighed and stepped into him.

He wrapped his arms around me tight and kissed the top of my forehead. “You should be fine for a short while, but we need to figure out what we’re going to do.”

“We?” He had a pack though I hadn’t met them yet.

“Yes, I wasn’t about to join your pack with that stupid ass Dad and son team. At least now we can figure out what we want to do together.” He kissed my lips and leaned back, smiling. “Mates usually join the same pack, don’t you know.”

“Yeah, you’re right, but I don’t want to make you leave yours.” He obviously had been thinking about this for a while. “Why didn’t you say something about this earlier? Why wait until now?”

“Baby, leaving a pack should be your choice.” His eyes warmed to a deep chocolate. “There was no way in hell I would bring this up until you decided things on your own. And as far as my current pack, it’s not like I’m around them much. Still, I can introduce them to you and see if that’s something they’d be interested in, or we could find one we both like and join together.”

He was right, I had some time before the pressure of being a rogue wolf would get to me. The coldness in my chest felt like an iceberg though. I didn’t want to rush into another pack, but at the same time, the longer I went alone, the worse it could be.

Chapter Three

We climbed out of the car, and I could've sworn my heart stopped. It hadn't, but I didn't know what I was about to walk into. I was sure Greg had already called his Dad as soon as they'd left to tell him what happened even though Jerry should've known as soon as I left the pack.

There was no telling what my parents would say or do. I only hoped I didn't cause problems for them.

The light was on in the living room, so I'd find out what their reaction would be soon.

"You okay?" Rage stopped and waited for me. His hands were full with the sundae and milkshake my parents had ordered.

"Yeah, just not sure what their reaction is going to be." That was putting it mildly.

"Well, they love you, so it'll be okay." Rage leaned over and kissed my cheek. "Either way, I'll be by your side."

"I love you." There were no other words to convey my feelings at the moment. Sometimes it felt like those words weren't adequate enough to describe how I felt.

"Love you too."

The door to the house swung open, and Cole stepped inside. "We're back."

"Don't you think they realize that?" Jess laughed and smacked his arm.

"They could think it was some ugly bear shifter." Cole glanced at Damien and winked.

Damien didn't even respond. He just shook his head and rolled his eyes.

"Time to face the music." *Let's just get this over with*. The longer I took going inside, the worse I'd have it built up in my head. Dad has suggested it earlier, but I was pretty sure they hadn't expected the news the same day.

"Honey, I promise it'll be just fine." He strode beside me and smiled. "They love you. Besides, if they don't take it well, we'll just head back tonight instead of tomorrow."

He was right, but I'd never wanted to disappoint my parents before, and that hadn't changed today.

Damien trekked in front of me and glanced over his shoulder. "We've got your back."

I needed a minute. I took a deep breath, trying to do that meditation stuff that was supposed to calm you. It confirmed what I

already knew; it doesn't work.

When I entered the room, Mom and Dad were sitting on the loveseat. The television flickered in the background, but the noise was muted.

"Where do you want me to put these?" Rage lifted his hands.

"Can you please go put them in the freezer?" Mom forced a smile, tension evident in her eyes.

"I'll go do it." Damien grabbed the items and left the room.

I bet he wouldn't come back unless he was needed. Damien hated tension, but if he was needed, he'd be right by our sides. He was loyal and not uncomfortable with confrontation. He just tried to avoid it unless it was necessary.

"Why don't we go help Damien put them up?" Rage glanced at both Cole and Jess.

"It's just two things." Cole huffed and went over to sit on the large sofa. "I'm sure Damien can handle that."

"Maybe not, the freezer could be full." Jess grabbed Cole's arm and dragged him out of the room.

"Then how are we supposed to help with that?" Cole tried to jerk from her hold, but she must have squeezed harder. "Ow, what kind of monster are you? You're freakishly strong."

Rage sighed and shook his head. "I'm sorry about him." He leaned over and kissed my cheek. "Holler if you need me."

Great, he was leaving me alone with my parents. "Okay."

When the rest of them fled to the kitchen, Mom frowned. "Jerry called and informed us about what happened. Greg is beside himself."

"Greg was who started it." I sighed, ready for the bickering to begin.

"That's what I figured." Mom rubbed a hand down her face.

"So you're leaving the pack?" Dad took in a shaky breath as if he was steadying himself for my answer.

"Yes, I've left it." It wasn't something that was easy to decide, but I didn't need to give any excuses. I made my choice and at the end of the day, I had to do what I thought was best. "I'm sorry, but …"

"No, don't." Mom reached out and took my hand in hers. "You know we figured it was only a matter of time."

"It just came faster than we had anticipated." Dad huffed and placed his arm on the side of the couch. "But, hell, considering how Greg is acting, what else can you do."

"Yeah, I don't know what's going on with him." I hated that there was this much distance between us. We had grown up together and were friends before we dated.

"For starters, his ego was hurt when you got selected and not him." Dad rubbed his forehead with his fingers. "Now you've moved

on and found your true mate, so that was a blow to his pride."

"So that makes it okay? Please don't tell me that you're siding with him." I loved my parents too much to feel like they were against me.

"Of course not." Dad startled and stood. "That's not what I was saying at all."

"He's just hurting and acting out." Mom glanced out the window as if she was searching for the right words. "He was raised believing that males were the strongest and needed to be leaders. You're shaking his foundation."

"I didn't ask for this." It was as if they all thought this was part of my grand master plan. "I was raised by the same outdated beliefs as well. If you knew that it wasn't true, then why didn't you enlighten everyone?"

"There's a lot that you don't understand." Mom closed her eyes and shook her head.

"Then tell me." I've felt for a while that something was odd and they were keeping stuff from me. Although I pushed it aside, thinking they would never do something like that.

"Are you okay?" Rage sauntered out from the kitchen, taking in the situation.

"No, I'm not." I wanted to yell and scream. "They're hiding stuff from me."

"It's a long story, Raven." Dad took in a shaky breath and took a step in my direction.

"Fine, we have the whole night." I marched over to the couch and plopped down. "I'm all ears."

"It's not that simple." Mom glanced at Dad and raised both hands.

"How is it not?" I felt like I was throwing a temper tantrum.

The kitchen door creaked as Cole stuck his head out. "I hate to end this. Like seriously, it's very entertaining. But Isadora called and needs us back ASAP."

"Did something happen?" Rage took a step in my direction.

"No, she wants us back because she misses your ugly face." Cole rolled his eyes and stepped into the room with us. "Of course something happened, but she won't tell me over the phone."

I was relieved that we needed to go. I wasn't sure how to feel at the moment, especially where my parents were concerned. "Alright, let's not delay."

Jess and Damien entered the room and headed toward the front door.

"Raven, wait." Mom rushed after me and grabbed my arm. "Please don't leave angry."

"You expect me to just be okay with all these … secrets?" The cold piece of my heart frosted over even more.

“We’re protecting you.” Tears filled her eyes, but I couldn’t let go of my anger—their betrayal.

“It might help if I knew from what.”

Mom sighed and dropped her hand. “We are going to tell you when it’s the right time. Though I pray that it doesn’t ever come down to the right time.”

My parents had always been there for me, and I’d grown up in a kind, loving home. Although right now, it was as if I was staring into a stranger’s face. “We’ve got to go.” It hurt to turn away from her.

“I hope it’s all worth it.” Rage’s voice was low as he spoke to my parents. “Otherwise, you’ve hurt your daughter for no reason.”

The cold spot slightly thawed at my mate’s words. He was taking my side but stayed respectful to my parents.

“Yeah, no one backs baby into a corner.” Cole wrapped an arm around my shoulders and stared my parents down.

“Dude, now’s not the time for you to reference old movies.” Damien ran his fingers through his hair and sighed.

“What are you talking about?” Cole arched an eyebrow.

“That’s from the movie Dirty Dancing.” Jess tapped her fingers on her pants leg.

“True story.” Cole lowered his voice as if he was telling a secret. “They stole the line from me.”

“Alright, as believable as that is, it’s time for us to leave.” Even though Cole had helped diffuse the situation, I needed to get out of there like now.

Rage walked to the front door and held it open. “Alright, you heard my mate.”

“Great, now we get bossed around by two wolf shifters,” Cole muttered as he trudged out the door.

“Thanks for dinner. It was great.” Damien nodded to my parents and followed after Cole.

“Are you sure you don’t need a minute?” Jess glanced at my parents and back at me.

“You know what Isadora will do if we don’t head back.” Jess was worried that I’d regret this, and maybe I would. At the moment, I needed space and time.

“You’re right.” Jess giggled. “She’ll freak out.”

Even if I was mad at them, I couldn’t leave it exactly like this. “I love you both, but I’m upset. I hope you understand.”

“We do.” Dad frowned and took Mom’s hand. “Please understand we never wanted to hurt you. It’s what we think is best for our family.”

At the end of the day, I couldn’t force them to tell me anything and had to respect their decision. However, that didn’t mean I couldn’t be

pissed. I had nothing left to say so I turned and walked out the door.

Rage stayed behind for a few moments before opening the door and following me out there. The other three were already in the car, and Cole was sitting in the driver seat with the engine running.

"Are you okay?" Rage grabbed my hand and turned me around to face him.

"I'm upset, but other than that, I'm fine." Times like these, he took my breath away. Not only was he fine as hell, but he truly cared about me.

"You know that I'd do anything in the world to keep you from hurting." Rage frowned and touched my cheek with his fingertips. "But I don't know how to fix this."

I stood on my tippy toes and pressed my lips to his. "You're helping me just by being here." His stubble brushed the bottom of my lips which made me moan.

He groaned as he grabbed my hips, pulling me right against his body. "You're killing me."

A giggle escaped before I could stop it. "Are you saying you're not into PDA?"

"Hell yeah, I'm into PDA." His hands moved an inch upward. "But if you don't stop, my future in-laws might see me mauling their daughter's body up against that tree."

Those words set me on fire. "Hmm … Maybe I could try to be quiet."

The car honked as Cole rolled the windows down. "As entertaining as this is, Isadora is now texting Damien, telling him to get his ass down there."

Rage leaned into my ear and whispered, "This isn't over."

"I'm holding you to that promise." I kissed his lips once more and pulled away.

"Come on." Jess stepped out from the car right as Damien clambered out of the vehicle.

"What are you guys doing?" They were saying we needed to go, but they were getting out of the car.

"I'm sitting in the back with you all," Jess said as Damien strolled around the car, sliding into the front passenger seat.

"We better get going." I grabbed Rage's hand as we marched toward the vehicle.

Rage and I got in our usual places, but this time, Jess was on my other side instead of Damien.

"How did we get so lucky to have your presence back here?" Jess had always hated sitting in the back.

"Because we're going to be performing hand checks on the way back to school." Cole put the car in reverse and attempted to back out

of the driveway. “Raven, please move your head.”

We were already scrunched back here. What was he expecting me to do?

“Just use the damn camera.” Rage sighed and leaned his head back on the chair.

“No, we’ve already established those cameras are for piss poor drivers to use.” Cole unlocked the doors and motioned for Damien to get out. “Tell me if I’m going to hit something.”

“Wow, that makes you a shitty driver.” Rage winked at me as he goaded Cole.

This felt similar to the day they had picked me up from graduation and took me to Bloodshed Academy.

“No, a camera is for making sure you don’t mess up. They are meant to be precise.” He pointed at Damien and sighed. “Bears, though, are notoriously bad for giving directions, so if I don’t hit anything, it’s because I’m a good driver.”

“Do you just say shit and hope it makes sense?” Jess rolled her eyes and leaned against the car door.

“You haven’t figured that out till now?” Rage leaned over me and hit the back of Cole’s seat. “He has diarrhea mouth.”

“That is offensive.” He put the car in reverse and kept his eye on Damien, who was standing out in the road, guiding him to back on out. “You both think you’re so punny, but it’s a fact that vampires don’t poop. Therefore, it’s impossible for feces to be coming out of either of my orifices.”

I wasn’t going to touch that with a ten-foot pole. “You do realize you just need to back straight out.” It was as if he was losing his damn mind.

Within a few seconds, we were out of the driveway.

The front passenger door opened, and Damien jumped back in. He closed his eyes and leaned his arm against the door handle. “Don’t ask any more questions. It’ll just encourage him to go even crazier.”

That was true since Cole always went for shock value.

A phone rang, and Rage shifted toward me, grabbing the phone from his back pocket. “Ugh, it’s Isadora.” He swiped the green button and put the phone to his ear. “Hello.”

“I need you here now.” Her voice was so loud everyone could hear it easily. “Please tell me you’ve left. As usual, Cole wouldn’t give me a straight answer and was trying to pull his shit on me.”

“We’re on our way.” Rage sighed and wrapped an arm around me.

“Good, bring Raven with you.” There was a click, and the line went dead.

“She wants me there?” Her request was odd. Most of the time she acted like she couldn’t stand me and that my mere presence bothered

her.

“Yeah, I don’t know why.” Rage frowned and placed his phone back in the pocket. “It’s definitely strange, and I don’t like it.”

“What did you expect, grumpy?” Cole turned on to the main road and accelerated. “She’s one of us now.”

Even though I liked the sound of that, I was pretty sure that Isadora didn’t agree. There was no telling why she wanted me there. Each time we’d met, it had been around bad things going on. So I was pretty sure she hadn’t changed her opinion of me and just wanted to have a girl talk. Now I was dreading what we were walking into.

Chapter Four

It was early morning when we rolled back into the Academy's parking lot. I thought back to the first time we did this. Damien, in bear form, had come running out from the forest, and my wolf forced me to shift. It seemed strange that a little over a year ago, I had struggled so desperately with my wolf. Thinking about it now made it feel like it was years ago.

"So … I guess I'll head back to the dorms." Jess climbed from the car with a pout.

She hated to be excluded, but this was something she didn't want to be involved with. As I scooted out of the backseat, I stretched out my arms and legs. Don't get me wrong, I enjoyed being squashed against Rage. After eight hours in the car, my body protested the small amount of room.

"Sorry, shorty." Cole frowned and wrapped his arms around her. "But honestly, calls from her aren't usually a good thing, especially when she was adamant that we get back here." He pulled away and lifted a finger. "Unless she missed my gorgeous face."

"I doubt it was that," Damien grumbled and scowled in Cole's direction. He had fallen asleep for a while. When he had started snoring, Cole silently opened the center console and pulled out some chocolate pudding. He ignored our questions as he opened the package and stuck a finger in the fudge. He then started crying out in pain and swerving all over the road. Damien had startled and crammed his body against the car door. Long story short, he thought Cole had shit on his hand until his bear senses centered him and he smelled the sweet fragrance. Needless to say, he wasn't happy with Cole and his wake-up call.

"Don't hate, hater." Cole turned toward him and waved him off. "I don't need your bad juju."

"We don't have time for this." Rage trekked to me and brushed his fingertips on my cheek. "If you're tired, I'll tell Isadora that you couldn't make it."

He wasn't thrilled about me being involved with the headmaster. She was a handful at the best of times. On top of that, he was concerned about my well-being. Between my parents and Isadora, I was too keyed up to go to sleep. "No, she wants me there too." I stood on my tiptoes and pressed my lips to his. "We're in this together."

"Always." His eyes lightened as a small grin peeked out.

"I never thought Rage would settle down." Cole tilted his head. "But not only is he firmly committed to one girl, he's whipped."

“You’re just jealous.” Jess smacked his arm. “He’s not whipped. He’s caring and attentive. If Raven wasn’t my best friend, I’d hate her just because of that alone.”

A phone dinged, and Damien pulled it from his front pocket. “Damnit, we gotta go. She knows we are here and lollygagging.”

“It’s like the bitch has eyes everywhere.” Cole spun around, looking in every corner.

I snorted and glanced at Jess. “I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Alright, just don’t wake my ass up when you come in.” She yawned and sighed. “I’m exhausted. Have fun.” She turned and made her way back to the dorms.

“Time to face the music, guys.” Cole turned and merrily strolled toward the main house.

“Doesn’t he ever get tired?” The vampire always had endless energy, no matter the time or task.

“I used to think he had to.” Damien sighed in defeat. “But I’ve never seen him get tired. He’s perky when he gets up and the same even when going to bed every night over the past three years.”

“Perky isn’t the word I’d use for him.” Rage shook his head as he watched Cole. “I can think of a few better. Smartass. Annoying. Attention Starved. Needy.”

“Oh, Shameless.” Damien huffed.

“Come on, guys.” Cole opened the door and motioned for us to hurry up. “The longer we take, the angrier she’s going to be.”

“Weren’t you part of the reason we were lollygagging?” Sometimes conversations were like whiplash with him.

“Don’t throw my past mistakes in my face.” Cole arched his eyebrows and lowered his head.

“It was less than two minutes ago.” He had lost his damn mind.

“Exactly.” He held out both of his hands and shook them with each word. “In the past.”

“Just don’t.” Rage closed his eyes and took my hand as we walked through the door. “You know there is no winning with Cole logic. It always slants in his favor.”

“I’m glad you finally caught on.” Cole followed behind us but reached forward, pushing Rage’s shoulder. “It only took three years.”

We rounded the corner and came face to face with Isadora.

She was outside her office, pacing, and stopped in her tracks when she saw us. “Thank the gods you’re here.”

“Most women I know say that when I come.” Cole smacked Damien in the arm. “Get it, come.”

“Mr. Smith, do you really find that appropriate in front of me?” She stiffened, and her nostrils flared.

Despite the fact that it was close to four in the morning, she was

dressed impeccably in a suit, her hair and makeup perfectly styled.

"How is it not appropriate?" Cole blinked his eyes and placed his hands on both sides of his face.

"You'll never pass as angelic." Rage grumbled and took a step toward Isadora. "What was so important that we had to come back immediately?"

She glanced down the hallway and then behind her. "Let's go into my office to discuss it."

I wanted to ask who the hell was she thinking would be up this hour, but I bit my tongue. That lady didn't like me much, so I didn't need to press my luck.

We all filtered into the office with Isadora in the very back. She shut her office door and sighed before turning around to face us. "We have an unprecedented issue."

"Then you called the right team." Cole walked over to her desk and sat on top of it.

"Mr. Smith, get your ass off my desk right this instant." Her face was already lined with worry, and her words sounded more exhausted than menacing.

"Fine." He stood and leaned against the desk.

"We found a dead body in the clearing that Ashley was killed in." She wandered behind her desk and sat, her fingers rubbing her forehead.

"Who was it?" Damien stared out the window in the direction she spoke of.

"That's the problem." She dropped her hands on the table and leaned back. "We have no clue."

A person being killed in the exact same location as Ashley was strange. Could it somehow be tied to The Elites? Surely not. I never answered their letter, and they never reached out to me again.

"What species is he?" Rage glanced at his phone checking the time.

"That's the one hundred dollar question." She bit on her bottom lip and sighed. "It's a half-breed."

"Like part human and part something else?" Times like these were when I showed my ignorance.

"No, it's two supernatural breeds." Damien turned away from the window.

"He's a half breed, fae and wolf shifter." Isadora sat upright in her chair and stared straight at Damien.

"How did he die?" For some reason, this was important to me.

A shiver racked her body. "It was like both supernatural parts fought one another. One side has teeth and nail markings from a wolf. While the other side was burnt as though from elemental magic."

There was no telling what that person had gone through. It

obviously made an impression on Isadora, so I could only imagine how awful this was going to look.

"It's getting close to daylight, so we need to get moving." Rage squeezed my hand and grinned. "Go on back to the dorms. I'll see you later."

"No, she needs to go with you." Isadora squared off as if she was prepared to fight Rage.

"There is no reason for her to go." Rage wasn't going to let this one go. He didn't want me to witness this.

"There absolutely is." Isadora narrowed her eyes at him, and her normal demeanor returned. "She is your mate, and whether you like it or not, you both need to do this together."

"Awe, this is a team-building exercise." Cole snickered and winked at me.

"Shut up, Cole." Rage's jaw clenched, and his eyes narrowed on Isadora. "If you want her to be more involved, that's fine, but not with this."

"You seem to forget that you're a student here at Bloodshed Academy and that I make that decisions." She lifted her head and looked at him down her nose. "Not you."

"It'll be fine." Damien patted Rage's shoulder. "Just come on."

I wasn't sure why, but I needed to see what had happened. This situation, all of it seemed too coincidental.

"Fine, let's go." Rage tensed as we headed out. When we were outside, he turned to me. "Go on back. You don't need to see this."

"No, she has to go." Damien stepped in front of me, blocking the way to the dorms.

"Like hell she does." Rage growled.

"She's expecting you to do this." I'd rather have run away and hid, but something inside me told me to face this.

"As always, the lady is right." Cole wasn't his usual jolly self. "Last time we didn't listen, we had to clean the bathrooms for a month. I don't want to do that again."

"Why did she make us come back? Doesn't she have someone else who can handle this?" It didn't make sense. After all, this was a prestigious school.

"Because she only trusts us three …" Cole stared off into the woods, and then a small grin filled his face. "I mean four now."

"Let's get this over with." Damien headed into the woods and took off running.

"How many times have you all disposed of a dead body?" I might not even want to know the answer.

"This is a first." Rage grimaced. "We better catch up."

The rest of us set out, and despite my being a girl, I kept up. It was

only a matter of seconds before we reached the clearing. Damien stood there with his back toward us, but his body stiffened.

"Are you okay?" It was unusual for him to act like that.

He glanced over his shoulder, his face a shade paler than normal. "It's worse than I expected."

That's all it took for Rage to grab my waist. "No, you can't be part of this. Go home."

Who the hell did he think he was, telling me what I was going to do? He wasn't my alpha. "Hell, no. Isadora told me to be part of this for a reason."

"It's not worth you having to deal with this." Rage's eyes darkened, filling with anger. "I'll take the repercussions, so go home."

This was the first time we had ever fought, and I understood that he was trying to protect me. There was a reason Isadora wanted me here, and to be honest, I needed to see it. Somehow, I knew it was linked with Ashley's death. "No, I'm not leaving." If I didn't stand my ground now, it would be even harder in the future.

"Please." Rage's voice cracked.

"She's right." Cole's usual demeanor was gone. "There is a reason why Isadora wanted her here."

Not wanting to prolong an argument, I hurried and stood next to Damien. The smell of burnt flesh made my stomach roll, and the sight of it didn't help either.

Never had I ever seen anything like it. It was as if the guy's body was torn in half. The left side of his body had teeth marks and deep scratches. The cuts were so deep that blood still oozed from them.

The right side of his body was completely charred. The black skin melted onto the bone, and even though his face was sliced down the middle, the pain he had been in was evident. This wasn't like Ashley's death. Whatever caused this, the victim had stood no chance of survival.

Vomit clawed at my throat, but I couldn't allow myself to show weakness in front of the guys, especially after how I insisted on staying. "What in the world caused this?"

"I don't know." Damien frowned as deep worry lined his face. "There are no traces of a struggle with someone else."

"It's as if his fae and wolf side fought. Death was the final outcome." Rage stepped next to me and placed a comforting hand on my shoulder.

"This is one of the rare times I wish that Isadora didn't count on me." Cole stared at the body.

"We need to move." Rage glanced at the pink hue that was beginning to hit the skyline. "Let's find something to haul him off with."

“Yeah, I’ll grab some branches that we can use.” Damien headed off toward one of the largest trees on the side. He began breaking off the limbs that were near the bottom.

“Raven, do you mind looking around to see if you can find any footprints that might show he wasn’t alone.” Rage’s eyes narrowed as he stared at the horror that was right before us. “The putrid smell covers up any other scents.”

I wanted to protest, but I wasn’t sure how much longer I could stay with the dead body’s smell. “Fine, but let me know if you need me.” I headed off in the direction that Damien had used in my training to hide and come out to attack me in his bear.

“This is even a little too much for me.” Cole gagged and his nose wrinkled. “I mean, hell, that blood is semi-fresh, and I’m not tempted to have a snack at all.”

The sound of limbs dragging across the field alerted me that I didn’t have much time. I gazed around the area, and when I stepped into the trees, there was one set of footprints.

I glanced around and was tempted called out to the guys, but something stopped me. I followed the tracks, and as my eyes scanned the trees around me, I noticed a letter stuck on a small, low branch, flapping in the breeze.

Rage’s name was on the tip of my tongue, but something held me back. I walked over and snatched it off. As I unfolded it, the familiar font greeted me.

Raven,

What you’ve seen is what the Elites are trying to prevent from continuing to happen. This is an important mission and one that you can help us with. If you’re interested in preventing more deaths like his, meet us tomorrow night at this location.

Do not tell anyone or there will be severe consequences.

-The Elites

My chest felt heavy, and I wasn’t sure what to do. I found these footprints, but there was no way that they were involved. The strangest thing was that there was no scent. Even though it had been hours since his death, something should be lingering in the air.

“Raven.” Rage’s voice sounded closer than I expected. His quick footsteps were heading in my direction.

My body froze for a second, and before I could put the letter away, Rage appeared, and his eyes went to my hands.

Regret clawed into me. It was time for the stuff I’d been hiding

from him to come out.

Chapter Five

He motioned to the letter. “What’s that?”

Well, this wasn’t going to go over well. I didn’t want to lie to him. “Just something I found.” I tried to act nonchalant and casually put it in my pocket, but his hand caught mine.

“May I see it?” He glanced at the white paper in my hands.

I was at a loss as to what to say. “I don’t know.” I wasn’t sure what severe consequences meant, but I didn’t want either him or me to experience them.

“Why don’t you know?” His voice was suspiciously steady.

“They said sharing it with anyone would cause severe consequences.” I didn’t want our bond to become tainted by lies. “I just want to protect you.”

His eyes warmed to the chocolate I’ve grown to know and love. “The best way to protect me is for me to know what’s going on.”

That was probably true, especially now that he knew I was hiding something.

He let go of my hand and turned his palm face up. “Please, can I see it?”

This was an important moment for us. The only part I dreaded was telling him that this wasn’t the first letter but the second. I placed the note in his hands.

“Thank you.” He opened the letter and read the words. “I thought this was some kind of sick joke.”

“What do you mean?” Was someone playing a trick on me? If so, this was a morbid way of doing it.

“Ashley had made a weird comment about wanting to be an elite.” He glanced up from the note and sighed. “I thought she was just talking about me and the guys.”

“That humble, are ya?” I cracked up laughing and probably sounded crazy. At this point, it was either laugh or cry though.

“I feel like I should channel Cole right now, which is something I never thought I’d say.” He folded the piece of paper back up and put it in his pocket. “But from now on, I need to know that you’ll tell me these things no matter the consequences. Just as bad as you want to protect me, I want to protect you too. So, keeping stuff from each other is only going to lead to both of us getting hurt.”

“Then in the name of transparency, I fully intend to go to this meeting.” He was right. True mates were meant to make each other stronger.

“Why?” He tried to where a mask of indifference, but the twitch of

his jaw was his tell.

"Because I think they may have answers about what happened to the hybrid."

"Maybe, but you don't have much else to base it on." Rage closed his eyes and groaned. "You're about to tell me something I'm not going to like, aren't you?"

Damn, he could read me like a book. "This isn't the first note like this addressed to me."

His shoulders slumped as he turned and leaned against the tree. "How many have there been?"

I could feel his disapproval.

"There's only been one other." I needed to clear the air between us. I've never felt so vulnerable in my life.

"When did you get it?" His jaw twitched again.

I hated that I was causing it. "The night Ashley died."

He flinched ever so slightly, but it was enough for me to see. "What did it say?"

"It said that I was elite material and that they were a secret group that was making hard decisions to protect our society." I hadn't been interested in joining until this moment. This group may be making it so things like the half breed's death don't happen. "After what I saw tonight, I want to meet them."

"Is that all of it?" He pushed off the tree and looked deep into my eyes. "Anything else you need to tell me?"

Realizing he doubted me hurt, but I deserved it. "No, that was it. You can even see the letter if you want to."

"Come on, let's go home." Rage stepped over and pulled me into his arms. It was nice and comforting, but the stench of burnt flesh clung to his shirt.

"Let's go take a shower." I pulled back and fanned my nose. "Where is everyone else?"

"They are taking him to Isadora." He took my hand, and together we headed back toward the clearing. "She has the skill of fire, so she'll take care of the rest."

Cole and Damien did a good job. There was no sign that the poor guy had ever been there; however, the stench clung to the air.

We hurried back without delay. The sun peeked out from behind the trees, and the brilliant sunrise streaked the skies in pinks, purples, and blues. It was hard to believe that we had seen something so horrendous just shortly before.

Luckily, it was early enough so no one was out and about yet. As we entered the girl's dorm, the hallway was eerily quiet as if the walls knew what we had witnessed.

We rode the elevator up to the seventh floor and turned right,

heading to our door. I grabbed the key out and unlocked the door, trying to be quiet and not wake Jess.

When we both were safely inside, I shut the door, and we tiptoed down my hallway on the left. At this point, we were in sync with one another and headed into my room.

"I need a shower." I felt dirty, and every time I closed my eyes, an image of the poor, defenseless hybrid haunted me. I grabbed my pajamas and headed for the bathroom.

"Mind if I join you?" He grabbed clothes for himself out of the drawer that I had given him.

Some of my anxiety dissipated since he was acting like normal. I'd been afraid that he'd be upset with me for a while. "Not at all."

We made our way into the bathroom, and I turned on the water needing it hot. I quickly undressed and stepped in the water, allowing it to run down my head and body. After everything that happened in the last twenty-four hours, I needed the water to wash away the stress and grime.

The shower door opened, and Rage stepped in. Moments ago, I had felt tired and stressed, but staring at him like this made another part of me spring to life.

His eyes slowly scanned me from top to bottom. "You're so damn beautiful." He wrapped his arms around my waist and brushed his lips against mine.

Not able to resist him, I opened my mouth, allowing him access. Soon his tongue slipped past my lips, and my hands tangled in his hair.

He kissed down my neck as my legs wrapped around his muscular body. He took a step into the water and gently placed my back against the cold tile. Somehow, the cold mixed with heat aroused me even further.

Soon, his mouth covered my breast and teased me mercilessly. He moved so one arm was supporting me while his free hand slipped in between my legs. He slowly inserted two fingers, plunging deep inside me.

Between his mouth and fingers, my body began to build up tension. I began to ride his fingers when his mouth came back to mine.

I reached down and stroked his hardness with my hand. Soon, he was panting as much as I was. The pressure was too much, so I let go and pulled his hand away. "Now."

That's all I needed to say. He knew exactly what I wanted. He plunged inside me, hitting my secret spot within. I moaned, and he placed his mouth back on mine.

My body moved in motion with him and increased the pace. Soon,

he was slamming inside me, and my back was hitting the wall. This wasn't like all the other times before. We were both wanting to connect and release our frustrations at the same time.

My arms wrapped around him, and my nails dug into his back. He groaned, and it was my undoing.

"Oh." I cried, leaning into him, biting his neck as the orgasm ripped through me.

He moaned, and his body began shivering against me. "Damn." His body stilled, but he hadn't moved out of me yet. "That was fucking hot."

The spot where I bit was still bleeding a little bit, but it hadn't punctured the skin all the way through. "I hope I didn't hurt you."

"Hell no." He peppered my face with kisses. "That was hot." He leaned back and slowly pulled out. "You better do it again."

I grinned as I stepped back into the water and kissed his lips. "I love you."

His hands cupped my ass. "I love you too."

MY HEART WAS RACING as Rage and I made our way back to the clearing. I wasn't sure who or what we were meeting and how they'd react to me bringing Rage. They had said to come alone.

"It'll be alright." Rage squeezed my hand. "Nothing is going to happen to you."

"I'm more worried about you and who we're about to meet." Isadora had insisted on me helping with the half-breed. I wondered if it was her that we would be meeting.

"Don't you worry about me." His eyes warmed, and he leaned over to kiss my cheek. "This is going to be just fine."

At this point, there wasn't anything I could do. I wanted to meet someone from The Elites to understand more, especially after that poor guy died, and Rage wouldn't let me go alone. So we were in this together.

Normally, we ran or raced to the clearing, but tonight we were taking our time. A cold chill shivered down my back. "Do you sense someone watching us?"

"Keep your eyes in front of you. Don't show any fear." Rage tightened his grip on my hand and tugged me closer.

Taking a deep breath, I forced myself to keep the same pace as when we had started out. It made sense that someone would be watching us, ensuring I came alone and unarmed.

The clearing came into view, and there were shuffling sounds in the woods behind us. It took every ounce of my self-control not to turn.

“We’re almost there.” Rage glanced at me and forced a small grin.

How I wished that I could come off that confident. Now more than ever, I was happy that Rage was here with me. I nodded my head, afraid my voice may come off shaky.

It was strange, each new obstacle I faced was right here in this area. The moon shone bright, and there were a few clouds in the sky casting an eerie feel to the forest.

More rustling occurred all around us, but we tried to maintain a united front.

The closer we got to the clearing, the more uncertain I became. What if we were walking into a trap? Maybe they were just luring me in to take my life. Sweat dotted my hairline, and I wanted to turn back to safety. However, there was no telling how many people were here. We probably wouldn’t make it that far. We were already in too deep, and freaking out wasn’t going to accomplish anything.

My mind replayed the memory of when I first began at the Academy. My wolf and I truly had turned on one another. At that time, I was having issues with my wolf overpowering me. Damien would tell me not to shift, but each time his bear charged, I couldn’t hold it back. The day Rage joined us, he had told me that my fear brought the shift. That what I needed to do was not freak out but have a plan ready.

We strolled silently across the clearing, heading toward the tree line.

Rage scanned the area and stepped closer to me. “If anything seems off, you run to safety.”

Yeah, that wasn’t going to happen, but I nodded to appease his urge to protect me.

Apparently, I was convincing enough because his shoulders relaxed ever so slightly.

It was an odd night; no critters were out, and the wind wasn’t even blowing. It was as if time stood still with us heading toward our fate.

As we stepped into the tree line, it only took a few steps before a silhouette appeared. The shadow was hard to make out, but it confirmed someone was waiting for us.

Taking a deep breath, I stepped into view of the person. Rage growled, not liking the fact that I took control.

The person had a hood over their head, and at first, their face was hidden by a shadow that not even my wolf eyes could see. When they stepped into the moonlight, I lost my breath.

Golden eyes stared right at me and their jet-black hair blended with the hood. Sharp vampire features stared back at me.

“Jordan?” I couldn’t help the question that filtered through.

“Believe me, I’m not thrilled about this either.” Jordan rolled her

eyes when they landed on Rage. “Of course, you couldn’t leave him out of this. Now I have to deal with two dogs instead of one.”

“Whatever it is, we’re not interested.” Rage scoffed and glanced at me. “Let’s head back. She isn’t worth our time.”

“No, you stay here.” She commanded us with her high-pitched voice.

She’d been a bitch to me ever since I came to the school. The very night Cole showed me to my dorm room, she put a target on my head. Apparently, she wanted Cole, but he wouldn’t have anything to do with her. I’d been her punching bag ever since, and after killing Ashley in self-defense, I wasn’t okay with it anymore. “Let’s see how well we listen to you.”

Turning, Rage and I began moving back out of the clearing.

“We know you killed Ashley.”

Did she think she could hold it over my head? “It was in self-defense, so if you saw, you’ll know it’s the truth.” I took a few more steps with no intention of turning around.

“Some of us think you are the vision in one of our leader’s dreams.” Her voice cracked, as if she was desperate.

“And I dreamed that I killed you by ripping out your throat.” Rage tensed and turned around. “So does that mean I get to kill you now?”

Her golden eyes darkened, and she laughed. “I’d like to see you try, but unfortunately, we are here to be civil.”

“Speak for yourself, bloodsucker.” Rage bared his teeth at her. “If you don’t want to fight me, then we’re heading back so we can wash off your stench.”

“In the dream, he saw your moon necklace.”

I stopped in my tracks and turned around. “So what?”

She grinned, knowing she had caught my attention. “It was the way of marking the wolf that could help the supernatural world balance out.”

“My mom gave me that necklace, so there must have been a hiccup in that dream.” My gut told me she was telling the truth, which made my skin crawl.

“Maybe, but think about it.” Her red lips resembled blood as she smirked. “If you really are her, are you sure you want more deaths like the one you just covered up?”

“Stop playing games.” Rage's jaw twitched, and his eyes glowed. “What is in this for you?”

“Look, I’m not thrilled about this either.” Jordan huffed and crossed her arms. “Do you think I’d be here if I didn’t have to be? I wish it was anyone but her.” Her eyes were filled with hate as she stared at me. “But the cause is worth more than my hatred for her.”

“Wow, I’m not sure what to think.” She had made it clear how

much she despised me. Granted, I wasn't sure why, but at that point, it was my relationship with the guys that appeared to piss everyone off.

"This is bullshit." He took a menacing step toward her and scowled. "You invite her here and then treat her with such disrespect. Why the hell should we believe anything you say?"

Jordan closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "The death earlier was due to him being a half-breed."

"If that was the case, how did he survive so long? He looked as if he was a teenager." It was known that when a human woman gave birth to a half-wolf, both died during birth. So this didn't make any sense.

"Since both parents were supernaturals, the mother and child were able to survive the labor." Jordan dropped her hands, and for once, her face wasn't full of hatred or disgust. She stared off in the distance. "He lived most of his life as a fae from what we can tell. Apparently, he turned sixteen a few weeks ago, and then this happened."

"That makes sense. That's when we come into our wolf." Rage rubbed a hand down his face and sighed. "So, the wolf and the fae inside became unbalanced."

"Yes." She bit her bottom lip and leaned back against the tree. "This is a growing epidemic that has severe consequences for all of our supernatural races."

"So what do you all do?" If people were losing their lives or something like that, the message did need to get out.

A small smirk crossed her face. "We search for the half-breeds to help them maintain their balance and take them to a place they can all live without the threat of combustion."

"Why should we believe you?" Rage turned around, scanning the area.

"You don't have to believe me." Jordan crossed her arms and tilted her head. "But how else would I know what's going on. Do you think I'd go out of my way to talk to Raven?"

Whether we liked it or not, she had a point. "Fine, I'm interested." If I could save lives, then, of course, I would do it. Besides, how could I live with myself otherwise?

"If she's in, I am too." Rage reached for my hand.

"Great, we could use you both." Jordan smiled, and my blood ran cold.

I hoped we hadn't just signed up for more than we bargained for.

Chapter Six

The next few weeks were uneventful. I didn't know what I was expecting, but it wasn't this. The Elites hadn't reached out again, and Jordan wasn't targeting me with her hateful gazes when I walked by like before. Granted, she wasn't going out of her way to be nice either. It was more like not acknowledging me.

Both Rage and I were on edge because of the quiet. It didn't seem right for life to turn to normal now that we knew what had been going on around us.

"And I said, back off bitches, I'm too hot to handle." Cole had his normal tumbler filled with warm blood while we sat around eating breakfast. He took a sip and waved his hand in front of his chest. "I mean, look at me."

"Has anyone else noticed that a lot of Cole's stories deal with how hot he is?" Jess piled some eggs on her fork and popped it into her mouth. "I mean, does it seem like someone is overcompensating?"

"Hey, hey." Cole lifted both hands in the air. "Don't shade. I'm just spilling the tea."

These two have been going at each other a lot lately. I wasn't sure what that was all about.

"The only thing you're going to be spilling is blood if you don't keep your mouth shut." She arched an eyebrow and swiped at his cup.

"I can't help it that people find me hot." He pointed at me. "Tell her how good looking I am."

To be fair, all three boys at this table were damn hot, but I wasn't stupid enough to admit that, especially with Rage sitting close to me. "You're cute."

"Cute?" Somehow that made him even angrier at me than Jess. "Cute?"

"Yeah, dickhead." Rage chuckled and wrapped his arm around my shoulder. "Cute."

"A dog is cute." Cole pointed at Rage. "A teddy bear is cute." He then pointed at Damien. "A vampire is fucking hot."

"No, a vampire is a bat." Jess took her straw wrapper and tossed it into Cole's face. "Which is kind of gross. They carry diseases."

"So, Raven, I was thinking about you fighting other supernaturals now." Damien grabbed his orange juice and chugged it down.

"Like who?" I figured he'd be bringing it up soon. I'd learned his weak spots, and he'd learned mine.

"I'm not sure yet, but I'm thinking of a few." Damien glanced over at Cole. "Maybe a bat would like a chance to prove himself?"

“You want me to fight her?” Cole frowned and sat back. “I don’t want to.”

“Are you afraid my mate could kick your ass?” Rage smiled as he leaned back in his chair, folding his arms over his chest.

“It’s not that, but she’s one of my besties.” Cole took another sip and slurped. “It would be unfair because I wouldn’t want to hurt her.”

Just when there were times I thought Cole was a complete narcissist, he’d do something like that. He was a really good friend.

“Fine, what about Madison?” Damien asked and looked at Rage.

Ugh, Madison was good friends with Jordan. So she wasn’t my favorite, and I was fairly certain it was mutual.

“That is a good idea.” Rage tapped his fingers on the table. “But I want to be there. She likes to fight dirty.”

“Fair point.” Damien nodded.

“Why her?” Out of everyone here, they wanted to bring in Jordan’s best friend.

“Because she’s a strong vampire, but not overly strong like Cole or Jordan.” Rage grabbed an orange and began to peel it.

“But why a vampire?” They were focused on that particular race.

“You’ve fought a wolf and a bear already.” Damien counted them off on his fingers. “The next step is a vampire. They are strong and fast but fairly predictable, ability-wise.”

“So fae like me are harder to fight.” Jess smirked at Cole before turning her attention back to me. “There’s no telling what you might get. You could get an elemental, telepathic, healer, or one with photokinesis. Sometimes, if they are strong enough, they can even have more than one power, too.”

“Photokinesis?” I followed along until then.

“It’s the ability to project and control light and nature.” A proud smile crossed her face. "It's super rare and the most powerful. It means they can control the elements along with light and nature."

“And if you’re wondering why she’s smiling,” Cole said as he chuckled, “that’s because she’s one of them.”

That made so much sense. I’d been wondering why she was admitted here since her family wasn’t alumni, but I’d assumed it was an instance similar to mine. “See, I always knew you were a badass.”

“Right?” Her cheeks flushed. “So that’s why vampires are safer.”

“I’d like to think we are more unpredictable than that.” Cole huffed and pointed at himself. “I’m unique too, dammit.”

“You’re damn right there,” Damien mumbled even though it was crystal clear.

“I mean who does naked gymnastics around the house?” Rage flinched as if the memory was traumatic.

“Hey, I was cheering you both up.” Cole lifted his chin and rubbed

his fingernails along his shirt.

"How was us seeing you naked going to accomplish that exactly?" Rage leaned back in his chair with his nose wrinkled. "I'm pretty sure that caused nightmares instead."

"One, it confirmed you both weren't gay. Because how else could you deny this delectable morsel?"

Rage scooted his chair closer to me and took my hand. "First off, that was not even a concern or question that either of us had."

"Very true." Damien gave him a thumbs up.

"But I was able to confirm it for myself." Cole took another sip of his drink.

"Were you doing cartwheels or something more challenging like a back walkover or handspring?" Jess tapped her fingers on the table and stared upward like she was imagining it.

Dear lord. Why am I not surprised that Jess was encouraging him? "Is it relevant?"

"Of course it is." Cole placed his drink on the table and lifted both hands. "It was definitely back handsprings and a back tuck."

"Oh … were you a cheerleader in high school?" The words were out of my mouth before I thought better of it.

"No, smartass." However, his blue eyes lit up with enthusiasm. "I'm just naturally talented and amazing."

"So talented that when you did your cartwheel, you fell to the ground with a thud." Rage chuckled and shook his head. "Only you."

"Yeah, and both of you assholes laughed." An evil smirk crossed Cole's face. "But I've had the last laugh ever since."

"Oh." Damien threw a napkin on top of his plate. "How so?"

"You know the recliner that both you and Rage love so much?" Cole's eyes twinkled.

Whatever came out of his mouth was going to be horrible, funny, or a combination of the two.

"Yeah …" Damien pushed his plate of food away from him.

"Well, after you dipshits laughed at me and left while I was on the ground, wallowing in pain," he said, a smile spreading across his face, "I decided that it was only fair that I get even."

"I've been wondering why you always get giddy when you find one of us in it." Rage tensed beside me. "You know what … I don't want to know."

"Too bad." Cole stood before glancing at both Rage and Damien. "After you left, I decided that it was only right for me to sit down and ease my pain in your favorite seat."

"Oh, god no." Damien jumped and pointed at him. "We promised to not get naked on the furniture."

"No, no." Cole cackled like a villain in a movie. "We promised to

not have sex in the apartment, which Rage has already violated."

"She's my mate, moron." Rage pulled me closer. "We said no randoms."

Yeah, this is definitely not a conversation I wanted to be part of.

"Anyway, I limped over and found myself sitting buck naked in the recliner." Cole waggled his eyebrows. "I even managed to fart."

"Dude, really?" Rage huffed.

"Oh, usually vampires don't do that." Jess leaned forward on the table with her head in both of her hands.

"Right, it was hard to accomplish." Cole sat down now that he had a riveted audience. "And the fart clung to me, so the only other option was to spread my cheeks wide apart."

"No." Damien stood, his face pale. "Did you butthole our couch?"

"Hell, yeah I did." He stood and turned around so his ass faced us. "I had to spread them wide eagle, much like women do on their backs, and rubbed it around until the itch was gone."

I couldn't even fight my laughter this time. "Is that why you didn't let me sit there the other day?"

"Yeah, you're my girl. These two dipshits," Cole said as he pointed at each of the guys, "had a price to pay."

"I can't believe you." Damien grabbed his plate and gagged. "I thought it smelled weird but figured it was from something that got spilled."

"Oh, no." Rage raised both hands, holding the pointer finger toward Cole. "It was all him."

"I'm so glad we're staying at your place." Rage leaned over and kissed my forehead. "Because it's minimized the amount of trauma I'm currently feeling right now."

"Me too. I think that chair should be thrown away." I giggled, mainly because Damien was heading back toward us and his face was somehow even paler.

For once, the orange tint of his auburn hair stood out even more from his pale skin. "Please tell me you didn't butthole anything else."

"Was that a question or command?" Cole plopped in his seat and leaned back.

"You know what, I'm disinfecting the entire place." Damien headed to the door that led outside.

"That wasn't cool, you know?" I tried frowning at Cole, but I wasn't sure it worked.

"It wasn't nice of them laughing at my pain and suffering, Rave." Cole pouted.

"Very true, but still." I couldn't keep the stupid grin off my face. Cole was a riot, but if his feelings got hurt, he got even.

"I'm sorry if we hurt your feelings." Rage smirked. "We just felt

like we didn't want to help a naked guy up from the floor when the injury was self-inflicted."

"So you guys are even now." Jess chastised.

"On that note, I've got Professor Shaw's class I've got to get to." I wasn't sure what else we could learn even though his fae lesson hadn't included that little tidbit about Jess. However, this was a new class, so it would be interesting to see what it was about. It had surprised me when Rage told me that he'd be in the class too.

"I do too." Jess perked up at that and grinned. "I didn't realize you were taking his course."

"Yeah, he said it's about a more controversial topic." That had intrigued me, but I figured it would be the same class moving up together with the exception of Rage. "Rage is in it too."

"I've got a new recruit I've got to scope out." Cole frowned and sighed. "It's so boring. It's some entitled brat that thinks his shit doesn't stink. Kinda like your ex." He pointed at me.

Rage growled. "As long as he leaves my mate alone, I'm good."

"I can't make any promises." Cole rolled his eyes. "It's another wolf shifter. I swear they are so boring."

"Really?" I picked up a grape that was left over from my fruit tray and threw it at him. "There are two sitting right here."

"You guys are the exception to the rule." Cole got up and bowed. "Have fun in your stuffy classroom. I'm being let loose in the wild." He grabbed his drink and headed right out the door.

"Well, that was dramatic." Jess grabbed her plate and sighed. "Sometimes he thinks too highly of himself."

"Nah, it's all an act." Rage took my plate and his to the bin.

"Maybe, but he's so annoying." Jess pouted and followed after Rage.

AS WE SAUNTERED into the classroom, I found it strange to see Jordan and Madison sitting toward the back of the class. I glanced around the room, not recognizing any faces.

A tall guy next to me nodded at Rage. "Hey, man."

However, Rage ignored him and moved to the open desks that were opposite to the door. "Here we go." He took the desk at the end right by the wall.

I moved to sit right beside him when a shifter behind me scanned me from head to toe. "Damn. She's fucking hot."

"Oh, no." Jess laughed. "You must want a death sentence."

"What?" His brow furrowed.

"Let me make it clear for you." Rage turned around, and he scowled. "She's hot and mine."

I glared at Rage. “Thanks for the compliment, I think.” My attention turned to the athletic shifter with dark black hair. “But he’s my mate so taken.”

“And not only a mate but her true mate.” Jess took the open seat on the other side of me.

“You’re one lucky man.” The shifter’s light green eyes seemed to be undressing me.

“Yeah, I am.” Rage turned around so his back was toward him.

“My name is Nate.” His eyes locked onto mine.

I wasn’t going to encourage this. “Good for you.” A shiver went up my spine. He made me feel uneasy. I sat in my seat and faced forward.

“That’s rude,” Nate growled. “Here I am complimenting you, and you turn your back on me.”

A low growl emanated from Rage’s chest.

Jess crossed her arms and laughed. “You must be suicidal.”

“Let me make this clear, Nate.” It would be one thing if he was trying to be friendly, but it felt like a challenge. We didn’t need a fight breaking out on day one of class. We should have at least waited for day two. “I’m not interested in you or anyone else for that matter. If you want to be friendly, then maybe try to be less creepy. Until then, leave us alone.”

“Who do you think you are?” Nate frowned and glanced around. “Do you think you can just ignore and humiliate me in front of the class?”

“Hey now.” Jess took a step in his direction.

“Shut up, fairy.” Nate wrinkled his nose, and his face turned a red hue. “I wasn’t talking to you.”

Oh, hell no. I stood and spun around. “Don’t you call her that ever again. You’re the type of person who gives wolf shifters a bad name.” Fairy was deemed a derogatory name for fae.

“You’re even hotter angry.” A crude smile filled his face, and he nodded at me. “Tell me more.”

Rage growled and jumped from his seat. “Are you that pathetic to look like a badass, or are you just a straight-up bastard?”

“I’m thinking bastard.” Jess spat the words as she quivered in anger.

“Dude, stop it.” One of the other classmates whispered at him. “That’s fucking Rage.”

“So what?” Nate chuckled. “Is he supposed to be some kind of special shifter or something?”

“Look at you.” I hated entitled bastards. Nate reminded me of Greg. “Talking all big when you’re sitting inside a classroom where the teacher can walk in any second. You got your ten seconds of fame, so be proud. Now, why don’t you leave us alone, including my

amazing friend who could kick your ass by lifting just her pinky?"

"Hell yeah, I could." Jess smiled at me and bumped her shoulder against mine.

"It's what all freshmen try to do." Jordan leaned forward in her seat and flipped her dark hair over her shoulder. "They all try to come in like they are the newest blessings to stroll the supernatural world." She narrowed her eyes at Nate. "If you don't shut it, doggy, you could be my snack later."

Nate's face turned the color of a tomato. "You listen here …"

"No, you won't be teaching the class today." Professor Shaw marched in donning his usual all-black clothing. He kept his eye on the new student as he strode to the center of the classroom. "A word to the wise, don't get on Ms. Wright's and Mr. Jackson's bad side either."

"I was just trying to be pleasant." Nate's voice cracked a little on the last word.

Professor Shaw tapped his index finger against his lips. "I find that hard to believe." He made his way over so that he was standing in front of me. "But let me be clear. If you upset any students in my class, there will be severe consequences. You're fortunate that I've allowed you into a higher-level class seeing as you're just a freshman. However, that benefit could be taken away at any time."

"I understand." It sounded as if the words were forced out, but at least, he was put in his place.

"Now, this is a pilot class, and as such, I've hand-selected the students here." He lifted both hands out and smiled. "As you can tell, it's a smaller class as a result."

Ever since we'd walked in, I'd been caught up with the douche head. Although now that he'd mentioned it, I realized it was half the size of the last class I took with him. There were a total of ten of us in the class this semester.

"One thing that must be promised is that you won't discuss anything you've learned outside this classroom." He paused making eye contact with each one of us before continuing. "If it does occur, there could be dire consequences."

I wasn't quite sure whether to be excited, alarmed, or nervous. At this point, if I had to settle on one, it'd be alarmed yet curious.

When no one commented, the professor turned and headed to his whiteboard. He wrote '**Half-Breeds'** on the board.

My stomach sank, and my chest felt heavy. Flashbacks of the dead teenager crowded my brain.

"There have been some recent discoveries about half-breeds. One that is very concerning, but we will get into that later." He closed his eyes and shook his head. "All that you need to know is that there are

several leaders that are very concerned about this growing epidemic."

"Epidemic?" Jess's brow furrowed and she bit her bottom lip.

"Yes, we will get into this later. However, there are severe ramifications for an interracial relationship, especially if children occur." Professor Shaw glanced out the doorway and paused.

When I followed his gaze, there stood Isadora. I had never seen her outside her office, so this was a change. I hoped that she wasn't here for Rage and me.

"Good morning, Professor Shaw." Isadora entered the classroom and scanned the area. "Is this the new class you recently requested from me?"

"Oh, yes." Professor Shaw grinned and took a deep breath. "I informed them that they were the guinea pigs for this and that we'd have a more in-depth review of supernatural races. Although, I was just about to let them leave because I don't have the books yet to distribute."

"Then please don't let me hold them up." Isadora gave a cold smile and motioned to the door. "Everyone have a good rest of your day."

Rage clambered out of the desk and waited for me.

I kind of didn't want to leave. Something odd was going on, but it wasn't like we were going to figure it out by staying. I slowly climbed out of the desk and took Rage's hand. "You ready?"

"Hell, yeah." Rage was tense from the Nate altercation.

"I can't believe we get out early." Jess grinned and headed toward the door. "Maybe we can watch a movie together."

Jess rambled on, but I couldn't pay attention to her. My eyes stayed on Isadora and Professor Shaw as we exited the building.

Something didn't feel right. I wasn't sure if Isadora and Professor Shaw were working together on this one or if Professor Shaw was teaching something she didn't approve of. At the end of the day, it didn't matter. I just hoped more problems didn't fall into our laps.

Chapter Seven

As we made it outside the main building, someone yelled at us.

"Hey." Nate's now too familiar voice stopped us in our tracks.

"Just ignore him and keep moving." Jess nodded her head in the direction of the girls' dorm.

"Hell, no." Rage turned around facing the douchebag. "I'm not going to run away from a wannabe alpha."

"Is he a wannabe when he's here at this school?" Jess arched an eyebrow.

She did have a valid point. Only the strongest attended Bloodshed, so it wasn't like he was an omega or anything. "Is he worth it?"

"Worth it? No." Rage growled out. "But it's a necessity to kick the punk's ass so he realizes his place as a freshman."

"Then we do it together." I spun around to face the asshole too.

"Dude, why are you pushing this?" His buddy from class grabbed his arm, trying to pull him away.

"No, they can't act like they're better than us." Nate lifted his chin and bared his teeth. "We're all elites here."

Cole's dark chuckle rang in my ears. "I'm so glad that I got back in time for this." He appeared on the other side of me, and together the three of us stared down the asshole. "A whimpering pup is dying for attention."

"Why don't you stay out of this, bloodsucker?" Nate stepped in our direction. "This is between me and them."

"See, that's where you're wrong." Cole wrapped his arm over my shoulders to point back and forth between me and Rage. "These are my peeps, no matter their race."

"You know what?" This was exactly what the jackass wanted. "He isn't worth our time. I mean, what do we have to prove?"

A sparkle shone in Cole's eyes. "Hell yeah. Everyone here knows we're badasses."

Rage was tense, but when I laid my hand on his arm, he relaxed a little.

"I didn't realize you were willing to share her." A cruel smirk spread across Nate's face. "I'd like in on that deal."

My feet moved of their own accord toward him.

"Someone seems eager for that deal." He winked at me and chuckled.

As soon as I was in range, I reared back and punched him square in the jaw.

His head jerked back, and then I kneed him in the crotch. He fell

to the ground in the fetal position.

I squatted next to him and growled. “Just because I have friends from different races, and I’m not the least bit interested in you, doesn’t mean you get to act like a jerk.”

Damien grinned as he appeared beside me. “Sorry I’m late, but it looks like Raven has already taken care of the problem.”

“Hell, yeah, she did.” Cole slapped Damien’s arm. “I bet he won’t be messing with us again.”

When I stood, arms wrapped around me, and I leaned back into my earthly solitude.

Rage kissed my cheek and chuckled. “Well, as fun as this may be, I think we’ve wasted enough of our time on this dickhead.”

“Ha, I bet his dick won’t be alert for a long time after the assault it just received.” Cole leaned back and extended his pointer finger with his thumbs pointing upward.

“Oh, dear.” Jess rolled her eyes and giggled. “It’s never a good sign when Cole gets punny.”

Nate was rolling on the grass, withering in pain.

“Let’s head back to the room.” The longer we stayed here, the more people gathered around. When I glanced at the crowd before turning away, I found Jordan and Madison in the front.

In those few seconds, Jordan nodded her head in approval.

DAMIEN NORMALLY WALKED with me to the clearing for our training sessions, but today he’d said he would meet me there.

Of course, the last time something like this happened, Ashley had ambushed me with a surprise attack and came close to getting the best of me. At least we now knew why she was so desperate to keep her relationship with Rage, but it had ended with her demise. I killed her in self-defense months ago. Nonetheless, her death still haunted me.

I had to reassure Rage over and over that I spoke with Damien and that it wasn’t a text. He was insisting on going with me, but Damien had specifically told me to come alone. After much convincing, I trudged out of the dorm room, heading to the clearing by myself.

When I reached the clearing, the first person I saw was Madison. Her long blonde hair was in a ponytail, and her light green eyes sparkled, perfectly highlighted by her outfit—blue sports bra and black training pants. “And there she is.”

Her voice had the superior tone expected from most vampires. They all were stuck up and moody; all except for Cole.

“Yes, here I am.” My gaze landed on Damien. “I didn’t realize when you said we’d be finding someone new that you meant the next

session."

"You should know by now. I mean what I say." Damien furrowed his brows and shrugged. "Besides, you should be ready for anything."

He was absolutely right, but that didn't mean I had to be happy about it. "Alright, so now what?"

"Are you kidding me?" Madison lifted her balled hands and placed her legs shoulder length apart. "We fight. What else?"

She was a little too eager for this. I wasn't sure if this was such a smart idea after all. "Alright." I took a few steps further into the clearing and took a deep breath.

Damien took several steps back and leaned back on one of the trees just a few steps away. "Okay, let's begin. Remember, no serious injuries and if anything gets out of hand, I won't have a problem ending it for either one of you."

I loved the clearing for many reasons. Sometimes it felt like it was a secret place tucked away and hidden with large thick trees circling the open space.

The sun shone bright, and it stirred the animal inside me. "Ready?" I'd never fought a vampire before, so I wasn't sure what to expect.

Suddenly her form blurred, and a fist connected with my cheek. My head snapped back, and my vision darkened for a brief second. I shook my head and blinked hard.

"Oh, this is going to be too easy." A smirk crossed Madison's face, and then she swung her fist upward, aiming for my chin.

I moved my head backward, narrowly dodging her.

"Stop taking the defense," Damien yelled at me.

A deep growl resonated within me, and I swung my fist toward her nose.

She easily dodged my hand and kicked me in the stomach. I flew back ten feet and hit the ground with a thud.

Damn, that hurt. Even before I could get to my feet, she was already standing over me. With a huge smirk on her face, she wasn't even sweating or breathing hard. Bitch.

"I'm so glad I agreed to do this." She reached down and picked me up by my shoulders. She lifted me high enough to where my feet couldn't touch the ground. "You aren't good at this."

"That's enough." Damien pushed off from the tree and marched toward us. "Let her go."

"Okay." She smiled as she let me go, dropping me once more on my butt.

My body hurt all over. I hadn't expected to be great at fighting a vampire, but I didn't think I'd be so awful.

"Are you okay?" Damien held his hand out to help me get up.

“Yeah, I’m fine.” If I took his hand, I’d look weaker than I already did. I waved his hand off and slowly climbed to my feet. I felt like I’d been hit by a tank.

“Awe, I wish I could say I was sorry,” Madison chuckled, “but I’m not. I’ve been wanting to kick your ass since the very first time I met you.”

“Well, you succeeded.” I held my side and slowly straightened out. “Hope you got it all out of your system.”

“Not even close.” She held out her hands again. “Ready?”

“No, I think that was enough for today.” Damien stepped in between us.

“How in the world do you get all three of them to protect you like this?” Hatred poured from her words.

“I never asked for them to protect me.” I was beginning to realize how much some people hated me all because of Damien, Cole, and Rage.

“Then you must be good in bed.” Madison stepped closer to Damien and used her index finger to glide down his chest. “I bet I’m better.” Her voice purred.

Damien grabbed her pointer finger and pushed it back to her body. “Not interested.”

“See, what does she have that I don’t?” Madison pouted, and at any moment, I expected her to stomp.

“That’s one thing.” Damien stepped beside me but kept his focus on her. “She doesn’t force herself on us. She has no ulterior motives, unlike every other girl and guy on this campus. When I didn’t warm up to her immediately like Rage and Cole, she didn’t push herself on me. She came here, worked hard, and then went straight back to her dorm.”

“Then, why is she here?” Madison shook her head so hard her ponytail whipped from side to side. “This place isn’t for the weak. You’ve got to be calculative and take risks.”

“Do you not think I took a risk just by coming here?” Somehow, right then, everything clicked and made sense for the very first time. “I didn’t come from a well-connected family, but you know that. I don’t have anything to prove to you.”

“Now.” Damien smiled at me and glanced back at Madison. “Are you in for training?”

Even though her face was tense, she nodded.

Whether I liked it or not, Madison gained something from fighting me as well. She would learn my weaknesses, so I had to get better than her and fast.

“Why don’t you take off? I’ll let you know when we’re ready for you again.” Damien watched her carefully as if she might strike at any

time.

“Fine, she’ll be feeling those injuries tonight anyways.” She sashayed past both of us and headed toward the school. “Have fun.” She giggled like she was the funniest person on Earth.

Yeah, she was far from that. I had to admit I hurt pretty badly. I needed to stay strong though, so I forced my hand from my stomach. “Damn, that was bad.”

“Yeah, pretty much like I had expected.” Damien frowned and scanned me over. “They fight completely different than shifters.”

That was an understatement right there. “A little warning would’ve been nice.”

“In my defense, I did tell you that.” Damien huffed and ran his hand through his dark auburn hair. “Remember, you even knew who it was going to be too.”

“She’s damn fast.” She was barely a blur; that’s how fast she was.

“They’re dead fast,” Damien emphasized. “All vampires are that fast if not faster.”

Professor Shaw taught us that in class last year. It just hadn’t hit home until today. “The older they are, the faster they get.”

“Yup.” He moved to the middle of the clearing. As the sun hit him, his pine scent filled the air even stronger. “Well, she hates you too, which is even more of her motivation.”

“I’m starting to realize how many people hate me.” It was a rude awakening for sure.

“It’s not hate. It’s something even stronger than that.” He focused back on me and sighed. “It’s envy and obsession. That’s what every person desiring power winds up feeling. There is always someone more powerful, attractive, and influential.”

“But I’m none of those things.” That’s what I couldn’t figure out. I grew up completely disconnected from my wolf. I was brought here without any choice, and now I was facing people who treated me as an adversary.

“That’s what makes you so different.” He sighed and stared off into the woods. “That’s what makes Rage, Cole, you, and me their target. We don’t care about power or where we end up on the social ladder. Women like Madison want to date one of us, and guys who are wanting to be on the top desire you.”

It made sense. If you don’t care, no one has a hold on you. That wasn’t why we did it. “So what do I do?”

“You kick Madison’s ass.” His words were simple, but executing them was going to be hard. “Go on back, and lick your wounds. We’ll try again next time.”

If I didn’t get this down pat, there was no telling what could happen. I was sure Madison was already bragging and yelling about

how weak I was at the top of her lungs.

Chapter Eight

The next few weeks flew by. Damien was training me again but was incorporating new moves that most shifters didn't use unless they were battle trained. Rage hadn't been thrilled with how I'd been coming home all black and blue, but he understood it was something I needed to do.

"So, why are half-breeds so dangerous?" Professor Shaw paced in front of the classroom as he waited for the answer.

This class was as interesting as his first one where we learned about each supernatural race and the common facts about each one. It focused on how combining certain elements resulted in half-breeds and their particular struggles.

Multiple students raised their hands, but Nate had to continue being his normal obnoxious self.

"Because they are unstable and weak," Nate called out before Professor Shaw could call on anyone.

It broke my heart that these people were struggling and needed a safe place to call home. I, at least, had an idea of how uncomfortable it was being out of sync with your magic. I could only imagine how they felt at the end of the day.

"Yes, that's exactly right," Professor Shaw exclaimed. "Even if both halves of them are shifters, the animals can't tolerate one or the other. Both continually striving to be the alpha."

"If that's the truth, then why isn't this public knowledge?" Jess chewed on her bottom lip, and her knee bounced.

"A long time ago, the supernatural races kept separate from one another. So these types of issues have only become a problem recently." Professor Shaw sighed and shook his head. "Just like the human population, our races have merged and want equal rights, which is fine. But when the younger generations find love outside their races, we're only now learning about the havoc of blending species together."

My mind flashed back to the young hybrid again. How could something so horrific come from two people loving one another?

"On that note, our time has come to an abrupt end." Professor Shaw rubbed his hands together. "Please come back to class with some suggestions on how to find these creatures. It'll be a quiz, so make sure you've done some research."

I grabbed my pink bag from the floor and stood from the desk. "I wish there was something we could do to help them."

"Funny you should say that." Jordan glanced at Madison and

pointed to Jess. “Please distract her for a minute.”

“Are you being serious?” Madison startled and blinked. “You want to talk to them?”

“Did I ask for your opinion on the matter?” Jordan narrowed her eyes and pointed to Jess once more.

“Fine.” Madison scowled at me before she obediently walked a few desks over to talk to Jess. “Hey, girl.”

“Hey?” Jess caught my eye and raised her hands.

Not knowing what else to do, I shrugged.

“Alright, Jordan.” Rage took my bag from me and slung it over his shoulder. “Spill it.”

“There is a hybrid that someone has located in town.” Jordan looked over both shoulders and lowered her voice. “The Elites want the three of us to go get him.”

“Get him?” I wasn’t sure how comfortable I was doing that. It’s one thing for someone to go willing. The last thing I wanted to do was force him.

“Well, you’ve got to understand. Most of them don’t know what’s going to happen.” Jordan took a step back and adjusted her gold top. “We can discuss this later, but meet me at Dave and Buster’s at eight tonight.”

“Uh, Raven?” Jess stood near her desk as Madison picked at her nails right next to her. The discomfort was clear in both of them.

Rage nodded. “Fine.”

“Hey, Madison.” The words strangled out of me, but luckily it was hidden by my voice.

Madison flipped her long blonde hair over her shoulder and chewed on some gum. “I’ve missed our little training sessions.”

Yeah, I was sure she did. “It’s getting close to that time again.”

“But this time, Raven will kick your butt.” Jess snapped her fingers and grinned. “I know my girl.”

The last thing I wanted to do was goad her, but Jess was being supportive, so I couldn’t say much.

“I doubt it after the slaughter she took last time.” Madison placed one hand around her stomach and propped her elbow on it. “I can’t wait to relive the experience.”

“If you hurt her beyond what’s needed, you’ll have me to answer to.” Rage somehow looked hotter than hell threatening the vampire with my pink backpack slung over his shoulder.

“Don’t worry.” Madison rolled her eyes and blew a bubble. She popped it and sighed. “Damien is there the entire time. He won’t let it happen.”

“Madison, you should be nicer to Raven.” There was a slight irritation in Jordan’s words, but she masked it pretty well.

“Wait. What?” Madison’s mouth dropped open, and her eyes widened.

“You heard me.” Jordan placed an arm around her shoulders even though she made sure it was only lightly touching. “Raven and her gang are friends of ours.”

“But Cole?” Madison's forehead wrinkled, and she was at a loss for words.

“We’ve come to an understanding.” Jordan dropped her arm and pointed to Jess. “All of us.”

“Uh … Okay.” If her head could spin, it would be right now. “Why?”

Rage smirked as he watched the entire show.

“It doesn’t matter.” Jordan took a step toward her and jabbed her finger in Madison’s direction. “Got it.”

“Yeah, yeah.” She lifted both hands in front of her face and stumbled back.

“Is there a problem here?” Professor Shaw arched an eyebrow and joined our semi-circle.

“No, not at all.” Rage reached for my hand and tugged me toward the door. “We were just leaving.”

“Yes, we were.” Jess walked around us and headed to the door.

“Okay, good.” Professor Shaw crossed his arms, focusing on Rage and me. “I’d hate for two of my most promising students to cause trouble.”

That sounded like a threat, and I wasn’t sure why.

“I’m not sure which two you’re talking about, but Raven and I stick together no matter what.” Rage wrapped his arm around my waist and straightened. “We just want to stay under the radar and do our own thing.”

“That’s good.” His attention then landed on Jordan. “I think you are done here, right?”

“Of course.” Her usual facade returned, and her blood-red lips turned upward. “Come on Madison, let’s go get our snack.”

Not wanting to waste another second here, I tugged on Rage’s hand, leading him out the door.

“What the hell was that about?” Jess whisper screamed at us as soon as we stepped into the hallway.

“I’m not quite sure.” There were so many things going on.

“Right, it’s like we were in an alternate universe.” Jess glanced back toward the classroom.

“Let’s head back to your dorm.” Rage pushed through a group of students who were standing in the middle of the hallway.

“Hey, what the hell?” Nate hollered even though we didn’t break our pace.

Not even bothering to answer him, I kept my focus on where we were heading.

A hand grabbed my arm and yanked me back. “Do you think you’re too good to answer?”

“Do not touch her.” Rage’s voice thundered.

“Bite me.” Nate focused on him.

I reared back and punched Nate square in the jaw again. His head snapped back, and he staggered back a few steps.

“Hell yeah.” Jess cheered behind me.

Nate shook his head, and he snarled at me. “Bitch.”

“Coming from you, that’s a compliment.” I never disliked someone as much as him—not even Greg.

“I’m about to take you down a notch or two.” He shifted his jaw left and right, working out the punch.

“Like Hell you will.” Rage tossed my bag over to Jess, who caught it, and he stood right next to me.

We both stared down the asshole, and I growled. “Come on.”

“That’s enough.” Isadora stepped from the adjoining hallway and shook her head. She glared at Nate. “Not even a month into the Academy and already causing trouble.”

“No, I …” His mouth opened and closed like a fish in water.

“It’s best if you head back to your dormitory.” She adjusted her black suit jacket over her black slacks. “I have no time for this nonsense. Mr. Jackson and Ms. Wright, please follow me to my office.”

Every time I’d run into her, she had a sour face. “Of course. Jess, I’ll see you back in our room.”

“Yeah, okay.” Jess pulled at her ash blonde hair. “I can stick around and wait.”

“No, that won’t be necessary.” Isadora waved her hand, dismissing her, and marched toward her office.

“It’ll be fine.” I forced a grin and winked. “I’ll be there soon.”

“Come on, she’s going to get angrier if we don’t rush.” Rage took my hand, and we followed behind Isadora. When we made it to her office, she sat at her desk and pointed at the chairs. “Please, sit down.” Even though her words were polite, it was clear that we didn’t have much of a choice.

She ran her fingers through her short, black bob and sighed. “Ms. Wright, ever since you’ve joined this Academy, trouble seems to follow you.”

“It wasn’t her fault.” Rage stiffened and leaned over her desk. “He grabbed her.”

“Mr. Jackson, sit your ass down … now.” She slammed her hand on the desk, and the noise hurt my ears.

Rage didn't move, his eyes beginning to glow. His wolf was bleeding through.

I grabbed his arm and tugged him backward. "Hey, it's fine." There was no telling what he was going to do if he didn't calm down. He had to be upset over Nate grabbing me. "Come on."

He took in a deep breath, trying to rein in his control. He stood back and slowly sat in his seat.

Not wanting to piss her off even more, I plopped in the chair as well.

"As I was saying, Ms. Wright, strange things always seem to happen around you." Isadora held her hands in front of her with the fingers on both hands touching each other. "You haven't purposely caused any harm, but between Ashley and Nate, you seem to be a magnet for trouble."

I could see her point. "As you know, Ashley was in self-defense, and so was Nate. As Rage was trying to tell you, he grabbed my arm and yanked me back."

"And each time, you claim it was in self-defense." She dropped her hands and leaned back in her seat. "I'm just saying I've noticed a pattern."

"Both times I witnessed it and vouch for her." Rage's jaw ticked, openly glaring at Isadora.

"It's come to my attention that your relationship with Ms. Wright could compromise your judgment." She laid her hands on the desk and tapped her fingers on the wood. "So maybe I need to be more cautious moving forward."

Rage frowned but nodded. "Yes, she is my true mate, but I wouldn't lie about the self-defense. Damien can vouch on the incident with Ashley, and there were numerous witnesses around for today."

"Yes, I'm quite aware." She leaned over her desk and focused on Rage. "You've been loyal to the Academy, and I hope that continues." Her green eyes landed on me. "And as far as you, just know I'll be watching. I see more things than what people realize."

It probably wasn't a good sign when the headmaster of Bloodshed threatened you each time you met. "I understand." At this point, I just wanted to get out of here and run away as far as possible, but I had a feeling that wouldn't do any good.

"Good, you both are dismissed." She turned to her left and began tapping the keys on her computer keyboard.

Rage stood and grabbed my hand. "Come on. Let's go."

Not needing further encouragement, I jumped to my feet and followed right after him.

I wasn't sure what had just happened, but the one thing I did know was that the headmaster wasn't a fan of mine. I couldn't imagine that

the rest of my time here would be pleasant.

Chapter Nine

There comes a time when you realize that you're at a pivotal juncture in your life. What you choose in a given moment will determine how your future plays out. For some reason, I knew this task for The Elites tonight would set the course for both Rage and me.

It was strange riding in Cole's car with only Rage. To be honest, I wasn't sure how Rage had talked him into it and probably didn't want to know. "How I wish we were heading out for a date night."

"You know, we need to do that." Rage glanced at me. His royal blue polo brought out the brown of his eyes. "I feel kinda like an asshole now. We've never gone on a date."

"The dance counts, right?" That was the worst and best day of my life. The best because I had finally synced with my wolf and, because of that, realized I'd met my true mate. The bad was Greg. To be honest, that whole relationship was sad, but thankfully that was in the past.

"I don't know if I want us to count that." Rage winked at me and leaned over, putting his warm hand on my bare thigh. "You did come with another man."

"Yes … But I left with the one that counted." His hand on my leg did things to my body that wasn't appropriate for the situation. I'd worn shorts since the weather in New Orleans was hot and humid. His touch always did things to my body. I cleared my throat and adjusted my white shirt, looking for some kind of distraction.

"Damn straight you did." His growly voice only turned me on even more.

The Dave and Buster's orange sign appeared and he slowed down at a red light. "Alright, here we are." He glanced around to see that all the street parking was taken. "I guess it'll be the garage."

"Do you have any idea why we're here?" Obviously, it had something to do with The Elites, but this was a strange place to meet.

"All ages hang out here, so there is no telling." Rage pulled up to the ticket machine and rolled down his window, leaning out to hit the green button. He grabbed the ticket and rolled his window back up. The large lever raised, allowing us to enter the garage.

It was packed, but we were able to find a spot on the third floor. As we plodded down the stairs, Jordan appeared at the bottom.

Her hair was pulled back and her makeup downplayed. Her golden eyes popped with the earth tones she wore, and her lips were a light pink instead of the usual vibrant red. Just like me, she dressed in a pair of shorts with a tight red shirt. "You guys are right on time."

Apparently, she didn't think promptness was one of our key attributes. "What are we doing here?"

"The boy I told you about, he's here." Her eyes scanned the area, and she opened the door to go outside. "Come on out here."

Rage sighed and placed his hand on the small of my back. "Fine, but we need more answers before going in there."

The entrance to Dave and Busters was less than twenty feet away. A group of four people stood right in front of the door. The girls were wearing halter tops, shorts so short that only a little was left to the imagination, and makeup so dark you'd think they were part goth. One of the guys puffed on a cigarette and had his hands all over one of the girls. The other guy was absolutely gorgeous, and a sweet scent hit my nose. The other girl was trying to lay all over him, but his eyes weren't focused on her breasts at all. Rather, his eyes connected with mine. His musky scent hit me.

He was a shifter.

"That's him." Jordan's voice was barely a whisper but loud enough that both Rage and I could hear her. "He's half wolf and half dragon."

"Dragon?" Those were rare. From what I remembered of Professor Shaw's class, they tended to stay around the equator, favoring hotter temperatures year-round.

"Is this some kind of joke?" Rage closed his eyes as if he was keeping his anger in check.

"Do you smell the musk and brimstone?" Jordan smiled at me like we were just having the best time. "Play along. He can't know we're on to him."

Now that she mentioned it, there was an acrid egg smell to his musk. It was disgusting.

"So what do we do?" Rage opened his eyes and glanced around. "Kidnap him here while his friends watch?"

"For someone that most girls want, you're not the smartest." Jordan arched an eyebrow and propped her hand on her waist.

I couldn't help but giggle. Of course, Rage wasn't dumb, but he was being a smart ass.

"Really?" His shoulders lowered, and he shook his head.

"I'm sorry, but you did kind of deserve that." I winked at him even though I couldn't hide the grin. "But I love you."

"Oh, dear god." Jordan threw her hands in the air and rolled her eyes. "Can we keep that sappy shit for when you're alone."

She reminded me of Cole for a moment, and I had to bite back my remark. "We'll see if we can manage."

"No, seriously." Jordan flipped her hair back and giggled. "Play along. He's eyeing you."

"No, no, no." Rage shook his head and grabbed my arm, pulling

me back toward the garage. “My mate will not be the bait.”

“So, I guess you’d rather this guy have the same fate as the other one in the clearing.” Even though her words were rough, she was acting her part. She rolled her eyes and grabbed my hand, pulling me back toward her. “Stop acting so jealous.” Her voice got louder. “She broke up with you for a reason.”

Rage growled, and his eyes began to glow. “What the hell …”

“Hey, she’s right.” I was trying to play the part like Jordan, but I felt awkward and stiff. “It’s not like anything is going to happen.” I gave a smile that fell flat. “I can’t leave here knowing I could’ve prevented something bad from happening. He deserves a chance to live just like we do.”

“Fine, but I’m going to blend in and lurk.” Rage released his hold on me, and stress lined his face. “Give me a minute. Then you two come in.”

As he strolled off, Jordan yelled after him. “How many times does she have to say she’s not interested?”

His footing faltered for a second before he continued heading to the front door.

“Pushing him isn’t wise.” I got that Jordan wasn’t part of our normal group, but she had to know that.

“I don’t get what all the hype is for fated mates, but now we’ve got more of our target’s attention.” She licked her bottom lip and glanced his way.

Let’s see how awkward I can be, I thought. I turned, following Jordan’s gaze, and stared into yellow eyes.

“Hey, are you paying attention to me?” The girl that was doing everything possible to catch his eye pouted and glared in my direction.

Her friend realized it too and untangled herself from the guy she was with. “Come on, y’all. Let’s go play some games and get a drink.”

“That’s a great idea.” She wrapped her arm through our target’s and tugged him in the same direction Rage had just entered. “Let’s go have some fun.”

“Uh … yeah, okay.” He glanced over at us one last time before following the other three people in.

“Here in a few seconds, we need to move.” Jordan dropped her façade, and her normal negativity returned. “That skank is going to cause us a little bit of trouble. That’s why we’ve gotta use his interest in you to get him away from them.”

Our cause was good, but Rage popped in my mind. “I’m not so sure …”

“Oh, save it.” Jordan tapped her foot and crossed her arms. “It’s not like anything is going to happen. Rage better keep himself in

check."

"It's not that …"

"No, stop." She reached over and grabbed my arm. "We're going in there, and you won't lead him on. All we are doing is talking to him and getting him outside so we can get him to the safe place."

"The safe place?" It unnerved me that I had no clue where that was.

"Yeah, now come on." Jordan's grasp was firm, and she dragged me after her. She opened the door and began to giggle. "Now let's act like friends."

At least she was being honest with me. I'd never been to a Dave and Busters before. The arcade was so loud it was like someone drilling on my eardrums. "Holy shit."

"I'm glad my hearing isn't as good as yours." She grumbled but kept a smile on her face. "It's just obnoxious to me."

A group of guys hovering over guns laughed as one of their buddies lost the game. "Loser."

The dings and chimes of all the games overwhelmed me. When my eyes landed on some pool tables, I almost cried happy tears. "Let's go over to the pool tables. It'll at least be a little quieter over there."

"It's better than in here." Jordan and I walked side by side, scanning the area for the hybrid. Hell, maybe I should give him a name. I decided to call him Ralph.

When we turned the corner to the pool tables, I wasn't surprised to find Rage there. He was sitting at the bar that separated the arcade and pool area. He had a draft beer, and there was a girl sitting next to him. Obviously, she was trying to catch his eye. However, his eyes never wavered from me.

That girl had no chance, but I couldn't blame her for admiring my man.

She reached out and touched his arm that rested on the bar table.

"Not interested," he said gruffly as he pulled his arm away.

"It doesn't have to be anything serious." She attempted to make her voice sound seductive.

"Not interested," he took a long pull of his beer and turned his back to her.

"It seems that I'm not the only one who's taken notice of you." A raspy voice behind us startled me.

The scent of musk and burning sulfur made my stomach churn. I turned around, and there was Ralph. "I'm sorry."

Jordan giggled, the sound a little over the top like any tipsy human girl would act. "Ignore her. She should be a blonde."

"Hey." It was one thing to act like friends, but it was completely something else to insult me during the process. We weren't close

enough for that shit. “Watch it.”

The hand from the girl outside appeared on his shoulder as she sashayed around. She sized me up and down and seemed to think she looked better. “How much longer are you going to be?” She ran her finger down his chest. “I’m getting lonely.”

Dear lord, just gag me now.

“These are some people who are from my circle.” He removed her hand from his chest but smiled. “So I’ll be back in just a few minutes.”

“Okay, I’ll go get us some more drinks then.” She pointed to the empty glasses that were stacked on the pool table. “Don’t be too long.” She openly glared at both Jordan and me before turning around to make her way to the bar.

“So … you’re a shifter too?” He picked at his bottom lip and glanced around.

“Yeah, I am.” I wasn’t sure what to do here.

“Can we go back outside for a minute? It's a little too loud in here for me.” Jordan pouted and motioned to the door.

“Yeah, sure.” He winced and pointed to his ears. “It’s terrible for me too.”

The three of us headed back toward the front doors, and when we stepped outside, the quieter surroundings made me feel less on edge.

He hovered close to the door and scratched his head. “I’m finally happy to see different races hanging out with one another.”

“What do you mean?” He must have grown up like me and only been around his kind. However, that couldn’t be possible since he was a half-breed.

“The whole elitist propaganda against races co-mingling.” He kicked at the ground with his feet. “It’s like we are supposed to stay within our kind.”

The door opened again, and Rage appeared. “Everything okay out here?”

“Yeah, everything is fine.” I smiled at him, glad to see that he wasn’t held up for too long by the girl at the bar.

A car pulled up at the front entrance and rolled down their window. “You guys ready to go?”

I came close to choking when I turned around and found Nate in the driver's seat.

“Yes.” Jordan reached out and touched Ralph’s arm. “We’re heading to a party with all kinds of supernaturals there. Wanna join us? It’ll be a lot more fun than here.”

He frowned for a moment and glanced at me. “Are you coming?”

“No, she’s got a date with him.” Jordan motioned at Rage by the door.

“But …” His eyes took on an oval shape pupil, which confirmed he

was at least part dragon.

"Come on, man." Nate motioned to the car. "You'll miss out on a good time."

Something wasn't right about not telling him the truth, but maybe he'd freak out. "I'll meet up with you there."

"So you're coming?" He bit his bottom lip as he looked from the car to me over and over again.

That did it. "Yeah, I'll see you there."

"Okay." He gave Jordan a wary smile but slid into the seat.

"Where are you guys going?" I couldn't not show up now that I promised him.

Jordan's frigid demeanor snapped right back into place. "It's none of your concern."

"But I told …"

"Yeah, thanks for that." Jordan smirked and slid into the back seat next to him. "I'll see you around, friend." She slammed the door in my face, and Nate squealed his tires as he took off.

A coldness vibrated in my skin, making its way deep inside my bones. Something didn't feel right about what had just happened.

Chapter Ten

The drive back to the Academy blurred together. My mind kept replaying the entire night over and over again in a loop.

Rage pulled into the Bloodshed Academy lot and parked in Cole's normal spot. "Hey, we're here." His voice was low, and he touched my arm.

"Yeah." Honestly, I didn't know what was wrong. Something was just… off. "That back there …"

"I'm surprised that Jordan wouldn't tell you where they were headed." Rage leaned back in the seat and turned his head toward me. "The only reason why he left was because you told him that you were going to show up."

"Right." Unease settled inside me. "Did we do something wrong?"

He reached over and touched my face. His fingertips brushing against my cheek. "It feels strange that they would do that, but it's a secret society and our first mission. The way I see it is you talked that guy into saving his life."

"That's true. It wouldn't be secret if they let just anyone know their location." I turned my head to the left and smiled at him. "I love you." Those few words reminded me why we had joined The Elites and were exactly what I needed to hear.

"I love you too." He winked at me and got out of the car. I watched him as he walked around the front of the car and came to my side.

As he opened my door, he held out his free hand to me. "Let's go give Cole his keys back before he starts chomping at the bit."

His play on words made me giggle. "That's cheesy."

"But it made you smile." He pulled me from the car and wrapped his arms around my waist. "That alone was worth it to me." He leaned down and kissed my lips.

"Thank you." I'd grown up feeling like I always had to hide a part of me, and I was learning that wasn't the case now. He knew and loved me inside and out.

"You are an amazing, caring person." He pulled back and cupped my head in his hands. "Of course it's going to bother you, being forced to break a promise. It wasn't your fault, so now let's go back to your dorm and celebrate that we accomplished something good tonight."

That did sound like an amazing plan. "You're right." I stood on my tiptoes and brushed my lips against his. "Now let's go see what our crazy friends have gotten themselves into."

AS I PUSHED the door open, there was shuffling from the living room. When my eyes landed on the couch, Jess was running her fingers through her hair, and Cole tapped his feet. There was no television on, and Damien was nowhere to be found.

"What are you guys doing?" I headed to the kitchen and poured a glass of water.

"Nothing … nothing at all." Jess smiled at me and then pouted. "Why didn't you let me go with you to town?"

"Sorry, we wanted to have a date." It was kind of true.

"That's the only reason I'd let them take my car." Cole rolled his eyes and stood. "Did you treat Betsy right?"

"Betsy?" Jess tilted her head with her brows furrowed.

"Yes, I treated Betsy just fine." Rage tossed the keys to him.

"You're not going to tell him?" It was a rare opportunity to get one on Cole, so I planned to take full advantage of it.

Rage glanced at me and jerked his head. He mouthed the words 'shush.'

"Wait ... What?" Cole glanced back and forth between me and Rage. "What were you saying?"

"Oh, nothing." I glanced away and stared at the wall.

"You said, 'You're not going to tell him.' What do you mean?" He moved so he was directly in my line of sight.

I avoided his eyes and glanced at Jess. "No, I didn't."

"What did you do to my car?" His nostrils flared. "How did you hurt Betsy?"

"It was an accident." Rage sighed and scratched the back of his neck. "So … Raven and I went to the ocean …"

"You better not have taken her on the beach." He stomped his foot, and his eyes widened. "You know how I hate sand. I'll never get it completely out of her."

"Well, it wasn't on purpose." Rage glanced at me and arched a brow. "We got caught up in the moment."

"No, no." Cole shook his head and put his hands over his ears. "There are no moments in the car."

There was an evil spark in Rage's eyes. "Well, don't worry. It didn't last … long." He smirked as he looked at me.

I had no clue where he was taking it, but I bit the inside of my cheek to make myself not smile.

Jess leaned back into the couch, watching the show with me.

"A police officer told us to leave, so we started the car, and then it got stuck."

"Please don't tell me it was the sand." Cole leaned over like he was

in pain.

“Well … You said it, not me.” Rage cringed as he reached out and patted Cole’s shoulder. “So, Raven got in the driver’s seat as I pushed the car from the driver side rear door. I thought it’d be easier since I'm supernatural, but the wheels spun out for a short while until the officer pushed from the open front passenger door to help get it unstuck.”

“Are you saying that both the door from the back and front were open while the wheels spun, getting it all in the car … everywhere?” Cole pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed.

“Yeah, man.” Rage dropped his hand and frowned. “Uh … I’m sorry.”

Okay, I felt too bad to let this continue. Cole looked defeated and sad. “He’s just joking.”

“What?” Cole’s head snapped up. “Are you fucking serious?” His eyes glimmered with hope.

“Really?” Rage threw his hand in the air. “I did all that for you to just cave?”

“Awe, he was sad.” It was one thing to give him a hard time.

“So, no sand?” Cole held a hand out.

“Yes, there was no sand.” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jess laughing.

“No moments?” Cole took a step toward me like I was his savior.

“Well …” Rage arched an eyebrow.

“You shut it.” Cole held his hand out in his direction. “You’ve done enough.”

“Fine, unfortunately, there weren’t any moments.” That was a travesty in itself.

“You jackass.” Cole spun around and glared at Rage. “You dickhead. Douchebag. Bastard. Dog.”

At this point, it sounded like he was just trying to think of synonyms to call Rage. “In all fairness, I started it.”

“But you didn’t take it this far. The sand was too far.” He pouted, and his eyes narrowed. “Paybacks are hell.”

“Yeah, aren’t they?” Rage grinned with no remorse. “Next time you think about buttholing something I sit on, remember this moment.”

“You.” Cole’s eyes widened. “But you …” Then he sighed and nodded his head. “You’re right. I deserved this. But if you do anything again, I’ll get even.”

And just like that, Cole was back to normal. “So now you’re okay?”

“Well, he got even with me.” Cole shrugged and patted Rage on the arm. “That’s respectable.”

“Don’t try to understand it.” Jess giggled and shook her head. “It’s

beyond our comprehension."

Now that was an understatement. "As long as everyone is good, then I won't push it."

"It's bro code, ho." Cole winked and pointed at me.

"No." He may have only been kidding, but that was no excuse. "Not funny."

"You see, it's only okay for girlfriends to call each other that." Jess lowered her head and shook it. "Men aren't allowed. So apologize, now."

Cole glanced back and forth. "I've called a few girls that, and they liked it."

"Were you sleeping with them?" Jess arched an eyebrow.

"I hadn't yet." Cole grinned and rubbed his chin. "I also did it while we slept together, and it seemed to get their rocks off."

"First off, it's not rocks." Jess frowned and stood, crossing her arms. "And secondly, they were hos, so they couldn't be offended. I just can't believe you." She turned and huffed as she marched away.

What the hell just happened? "Hey, Jess."

"Please don't follow me." A tear shimmered in her eye as she huffed the rest of the way to her room.

"Dude, what did you do?" Rage walked over to where Jess had been sitting and plopped down. He patted the open seat next to him.

"Thanks, man." Cole sat next to him where he had just patted. "I'm not sure."

"Really?" Rage scooted closer to the edge.

"Yeah, I mean you were here." Cole frowned and sighed.

"No, I meant really." He waved his hands in his direction. "That was supposed to be for Raven."

"You were looking at me when you said it though." Cole leaned back and settled in. "It was meant for me, so deal with it."

After what had just happened and Jess's meltdown, I was spent. "While you two catch up, I'm going to change. I'm exhausted."

"Oh … Why don't you just wear your normal attire when you and Rage crawl into bed together?" Cole lifted his hand and shrugged.

Rage smacked his arm. "Dude, she's not wearing her birthday suit."

"Look at her." Cole motioned my way. "You can't blame me for trying."

"Hell no, I can't." Rage nodded his head and his eyes scanned me from head to toe. My body heated up in response.

"As awkward as this is, I'm going to bed." At this point, I wanted some space even from Rage. Today was a whirlwind of emotions, and I needed some time alone to figure out my feelings. Yes, Rage could help me through them, but I wanted to be my own person. I didn't

want to fall into the trap of losing sight of where I began and where I ended. The mate bond was strong and amazing, but that didn't mean we couldn't take a time-out for ourselves.

"Oh, damn. Now he's going to kick my ass out." Cole pouted. "Damien is at our place, Lysoling everything because he said he now couldn't trust that my butthole only touched the chair."

"No, stay." I hoped I didn't sound desperate. "You guys hang out. You don't have to call it an early night just because of me."

"But I'm tired too." Rage stood and wrapped his arms around me. "Maybe I need some rest."

"I'm sure you are too, but your friend here needs more time, due to his poor choices." I kissed his lips and stepped from his hold.

"He's your friend too." Rage groaned.

"Hey, I'm right here." Cole jumped from the couch and came over, wrapping his arms around both me and Rage. "Don't talk about me like I'm not even in the room."

His cotton candy smell filled my nose. "Believe me, no one can forget that."

"Awe, I love you too, Ravey." Cole kissed my head and moved his arm from Rage so that he was hugging me. "I'm not sure what we would've done without you."

Even though he was a pain in the ass, he was one of the most loyal and supportive friends I'd ever had. "I love you too."

SOMETHING DROPPED hard on the ground, stirring me from my sleep. Somehow, Rage slept through it as he snored softly, his arm draped across my waist.

Damnit, I didn't want to wake him up but wanted to check in case it was Jess. I took a deep breath and wiggled my way out of his hold without waking him. As I placed my feet on the ground, I raised slowly so the bed didn't shift a ton all at once. I lightly stepped across the room and slowly opened the door wide enough for me to slip through.

I hated sneaking out of the room, but I needed to talk to Jess alone.

White blonde hair poked out from the pantry. She was digging in our sweet stash.

"You okay?" I didn't want to scare her but also wanted her to know I was here.

It took a second, but she eventually stepped from the pantry and turned to face me. "Uh, yeah." She took another bite of her Snickers and jabbed her finger in my direction. "Don't judge me."

"I'm not." Even though I had to bite back my smile. "I just wanted

to check on you. I heard something and figured it was you."

"Damn you and your wolf ears." She sauntered over to the small kitchen table and sat down. "I should've known better than to come out."

That kind of hurt. "Look, I don't have to be here." I tried to keep my voice steady.

"Awe, damn." Jess put her hands on the table and closed her eyes. "I'm not trying to be a bitch."

"No, it's fine." I didn't want to push myself on her. "I'll go back to bed."

"Please stay." She pushed her long bangs out of her face and placed the candy bar on the table. "I'm just stressed and taking it out on you."

Maybe that was an opening. "I'm here for you. You know that, right?"

A small grin played at her lips. "Of course I know that. It's just that life's taking off in an unexpected direction, and I'm not sure what's going on."

Now that was something I could empathize with. "Kind of like last year for me?"

"Well, yeah." She took a deep breath and let it out. "How did you handle it?"

"You take it day by day." I wouldn't give up last year for anything. It got me here with amazing friends and my true mate. "And at the end of the roller coaster, you'll be glad you took the ride."

"I sure hope you're right." She picked at the wrapper and licked her bottom lip. "Do you believe what's being said in our class with Professor Shaw?"

"I'm not sure what you're asking."

"Do you think interracial couples should be frowned upon?" She glanced up and met my eyes.

"From everything I've learned, it isn't something I'd ever do." The kid in the clearing popped up front and center in my mind. "There is more at stake than just the two people. You have to think about children and what complications could result there. Are you …?"

"No, it's not like I'm interested in dating another race or anything." She tapped her fingers on the table and averted her eyes. "We've never talked about it outside the class, so I've been wondering about your thoughts."

"Of course." She wanted to be alone, so I thought I should probably head back to the bedroom. "You know you can ask me anything, right? You're stuck with me for life."

There was a sadness in her violet eyes. "I sure hope so."

"Are you sure you're okay?" I hated seeing her like this. "I'm here

for you."

"It's just stress. I'm fine." Jess sighed and tilted her head. "Go back to sleep. Maybe we can have a girls' night tomorrow?"

"I'm in."

She grinned as some of the worry lines relaxed. "Great. It's a date." She gestured to my room. "Now go back to sleep. I'm fine, promise."

"Goodnight." I turned and made my way back to my room, but unease filled my stomach. Jess was holding something back from me, and I wasn't sure why. We'd never had something between us before. I hoped that I was just overreacting and reading more into it than what was there.

Chapter Eleven

As Rage, Jess, and I entered Professor Shaw's class, Nate was already in his seat. It was strange. He always got here before us. It made me wonder just how early he came to class.

"Looky here." Nate tapped his pencil on his desk. "The King and Queen of Bloodshed Academy along with their little weird sidekick has once again blessed us with their presence."

"What the hell is your problem?" Jess threw her backpack on the ground next to her desk.

"Oh, the fairy is getting fired up." Nate chuckled and dropped the pencil on his desk.

"He's an ass, Jess." He always popped up at the most inopportune time like last night at Dave and Busters. "Annoying people get their kicks off us reacting. Just ignore him, and he'll begin whimpering like the dog that he is."

"You bitch," Nate growled and stood.

"If you call her one other name, I'll knock your teeth down your throat." Rage's nostrils flared, and he stepped beside me.

"Awe, did I ruffle your fur?" Nate laughed at his joke.

I reached over and placed my hand on Rage's arm. "Seriously, ignore him. He isn't worth our time." I had hoped to ask him how last night went, but it was obviously not going to happen.

"Oh, dear god." Jordan marched into the room with Madison and rolled her eyes. "I swear shifters are such a pain in the ass, especially wolves. Every one of them is fighting for the ultimate alpha role." She took a sip of her blood bag that was close to empty and took her normal seat.

"It's obviously me." Nate pounded on his chest. "The school worships them, but that won't last much longer."

"You do realize if you thought that, you wouldn't be trying so hard to prove it." Jess slipped into her seat and flipped her hair over her shoulders.

"Listen here, you …"

"Stop that sentence right there." Professor Shaw entered the room and glared at the boy. "Just because your father is head of security doesn't mean that you can be a …" He glanced at the ceiling and snapped his fingers.

"An ass? A bully? Overcompensating for his … insecurities?" Jess crossed her legs and smirked. "There are so many options."

And that was her using her filter. I loved my fiery little friend.

"Well, I won't say that you're wrong, but it's not appropriate for a

professor to say those things to a student." He hummed and then lifted a finger. "Let's settle on pompous."

"A pompous ass works for me." Rage placed my bag on the ground and slid into his seat.

"What the hell?" Nate's face flushed. "I'm right here."

"Oh, we know." I wished it was possible to forget that he was in the class. "We don't say anything behind your back we wouldn't say to your face."

"Alright, that's enough." Professor Shaw clapped his hands and motioned for all of us to sit. "Now it's time to talk half-breeds."

THE CLASS WAS the same thing as previous days, just a lecture about different supernatural race combinations. "I never imagined the fae side would attack the vampire half like that. Though it makes sense that the fae side is so nature-driven, which is the offset of needing blood as sustenance."

"No one deserves that." Rage frowned, holding the door open for Jess and me to walk through.

There was a chill in the air, reminding me that Christmas was just around the corner. I missed my parents desperately, but I wasn't part of their pack any longer. Hell, I wasn't sure if I was ready to go back there and deal with Greg either. He'd been texting me on and off again even though I never responded. Rage wasn't thrilled about it, but what more could I do.

"There's my favorite people." Cole was in the courtyard and headed in our direction with Damien following behind. "How's it going?"

"It was enlightening." That's the best way to explain the class in general. "What are you two up to?"

"We just got back from scouting someone else out." Damien sighed and stopped about a foot away from us. "Let me tell you. I wasn't sure I'd make it back."

"Hey, dickhead." Cole slapped his back. "You're welcome for me driving you."

"No, you're welcome that I went with you." Damien punched Cole's arm. "You wouldn't have been able to get close to the shifter otherwise."

"Fine, it was a win-win. Okay?" Cole wrapped his hand around his mouth so only Jess, Rage, and I could see. He mouthed 'not to us.

"Sometimes it might be nice to be considerate of others, you know." Jess placed a hand on her hip and shook her head.

"Whoa, what?" Cole dropped his hands and looked around. "Where the hell did that come from?"

“Damien goes and helps you. You still give him crap.” Jess pointed her finger accusingly at him.

This wasn’t like her. Her accusation had come out of the blue, and it was Cole’s normal goading that he always did. It’s one reason why he was so fun.

“Hey, it’s fine.” Damien held his hands up in surrender. “I expect that kinda shit from him.”

“Yeah, if he didn’t do that stuff, he wouldn’t be Cole.” Rage adjusted my bag over his shoulder. “Whether we would like him more like that, it doesn’t matter. He’s going to stay, annoying us for the rest of our time here.”

“Oh, no.” Cole threw his arm around Jess and pulled her tight. “You all are stuck with me for the rest of your life. You can’t get rid of this ever.”

“Dear lord.” Jess stiffened under his touch and leaned away. “As fun as this is, I’ve got to get back to the dorm and call my dad.”

There was something going on, but she obviously didn’t want to talk to me about it. “Okay, I can go with you.”

“No, I’m good.” She wriggled out of his grasp and forced a sad smile. “I’ll catch up with you all later.” She hurried off in the direction of our dorm, leaving the four of us speechless for a minute.

“What’s her deal?” Damien arched an eyebrow and glanced in my direction.

“I have no clue.” That admission was painful. Jess was pulling away from me. Maybe I had upset her somehow.

“She’s just going through some things.” Rage leaned over and kissed my forehead. “Don’t stress about it.”

That was easier said than done. “Yeah, but …”

“It’s my fault.” Cole’s eyes darkened as he looked at the ground. “I said something to her the other day.” He let out a long breath. “How was class today?”

“Another interesting day.” Rage grabbed my hand and glanced behind us. “We learned about fae and vampire half-breeds.”

“Yeah, that’s one of the worst combinations.” Damien ran his hand through his dark auburn hair. “It’s a travesty.”

“How do you know about it?” This was Professor Shaw’s pilot class.

“Oh, Professor Shaw is my mentor.” Damien shrugged and leaned back. “That’s how he knew that we needed help with your necklace too.”

“Speaking of which, I need that back. It was a gift from my mother. If I had known that Damien was that close with Professor Shaw, I would’ve asked him for it months ago. For some reason, it didn’t feel right to ask the teacher directly.

“He’s trying to determine who spelled it.” Damien pointed at the necklace with the red stone around my neck that Rage had given me for Christmas last year. “Besides, you always wear that one now.”

“It was a family gift.” Rage rolled his eyes at his friend. “So if you could get it back, it’d mean a lot.”

“Have fun with that, man.” Cole laughed, but it sounded forced. “Professor Shaw doesn’t like giving things up, especially if they have a mystery to them.” He scrunched his lips. “So what’s so deadly about these half-breeds anyway?”

“Dude, you saw that boy who had burns on one side and wolf scratches on the other.” Damien flinched at the memory. “If that didn’t scare you, what else will?”

“Yeah, yeah. I got it.” Cole sighed dramatically and made his bottom lip quiver. “So we’ll never have a Damien Junior? We’ll have to be childless.”

Having children was a priority for all supernaturals. We needed to ensure that our race didn’t die off.

“Awe, how sweet.” Jordan appeared beside me and smirked at Cole. “You finally came out.”

“Yup, why else did I sleep with you?” He arched his eyebrow and chuckled. “That’s the only plausible explanation.”

It took all my strength not to laugh.

“You jerk.” Jordan's nostrils flared and she stepped in his direction. “Do you think everything is a game?”

“Well, you let me hit a home run with you. You can’t blame me for being confused.” He cringed and shook his hands. “Some images haunt you for life.”

Cole was as loyal as they come, but if you hurt or attacked anyone he considered family, he turned cold and unrelenting.

“Come on, Jordan.” Madison appeared and grabbed her friend’s arm. “You don’t deserve this. It’s like they think it’s some kind of joke.”

“No, I don’t.” A wicked glint reflected in his eyes. “Everything you stand for is a joke, and I’m not interested in anything you think or do.”

“You better watch yourself.” Jordan bared her teeth, letting her two incisors descend. “There’s more at stake here than what meets the eye.”

Even though Cole always hung around, I usually forgot he was a vampire, so seeing her teeth like that wasn’t something I was used to.

“There always is.” Cole’s chuckle had a dark edge, and for one of the first times ever, I saw the creature he was excellent at hiding. If I ever doubted that he was a predator, I couldn’t any longer.

“Alright, you got to make your scene.” Rage turned to face Jordan

and Madison. He waved his hands in a circle, pointing out all of the students who were standing and watching the show. “I think it’s best if you two walk away before Cole can’t hold himself back any longer.”

I hadn’t even realized there were people all around, watching us. Cole did appear a little unhinged.

“Now listen here.” Jordan placed a hand on her chest, and her eyes narrowed to slits.

“Enough is enough already.” Damien’s low voice rang clearly in the air. “Like Rage said, you need to leave.”

It’s always been clear that Damien was an alpha, but I never realized his strength until now.

“Fine.” Jordan huffed and frowned. “But keep him in line.”

“No one can keep me in line.” Cole taunted her.

“You’re vicious.” Rage snorted and punched him in the arm.

“Hey, I just do what most everyone is afraid of doing.” Cole lifted his pointer fingers in the air and did a little jig.

“Oh.” Damien groaned and rubbed his eyes. “I’m afraid to ask.”

“I don’t bull shit. Instead, I tell people exactly how it is.” Cole adjusted the material at the shoulders of his polo shirt. “Many people are afraid to do that.”

“That’s true, but it’s always your distorted version.” Rage shook his head and took my hand again. “Cole logic can be hard to figure out sometimes.”

“I don’t think so.” Cole may have been a hard ass, but he was more than that. “He loves his friends and family. He won’t tolerate any of them getting hurt.”

“Finally, someone who gets me.” He truly smiled and marched over. Before I knew it, he had pulled me away from Rage and wrapped his arms around me. “Now that you know my secret, no more telling anyone, okay?”

“Of course.” I hugged him back and kissed his cheek. “I’m glad I’m stuck with you.”

“Okay, okay.” Rage grabbed my arm, pulling me back to him. “Enough of trying to steal my mate. I’m not letting it happen.”

“Sometimes I wonder what would’ve happened if I hadn’t brought you along to her graduation.” Cole tapped a finger to his lips and glanced upward. “If I would’ve had her to myself the whole ride to New Orleans, maybe I could have wooed her before she met you.”

“First off, there is no wooing in this day and age.” Rage pulled me closer to him and wrapped an arm around my waist. “And secondly, you had no chance.”

“It’s true, man.” Damien patted him on the back. “There was no way in hell you could’ve beat him. But at least, he shares her with us.”

“Wait. What?” Cole perked and winked at me. “I didn’t realize

there was sharing."

"No." He was a handful at times. "That's not what he meant."

"But he said …"

"Don't even think about it, Cole." Rage's shoulders shook behind me. "I will kill you if you try."

"Oh, and just like that, my dream vanishes." Cole glanced toward the girl's dorm and sighed.

There was something strange going on, and neither Cole nor Jess wanted to tell me. I wanted to demand their secrets, but I figured they'd let us know when the time was right. I just wished I could fix whatever was going on.

Chapter Twelve

I walked out of my bedroom, ready to head to breakfast. Today, I was working out with Damien again and wore some black exercise pants with a pink tank top. Normally, Jess would be up and waiting on me, but the living room was bare.

Maybe for once, I had gotten ready before her. I headed to her bedroom and knocked on the door. “Hey, are you ready to go eat?”

“I’m not hungry this morning.” Jess’s voice was groggy like I had just woke her up.

Something strange was going on. “You never skip a meal.” Despite her tiny size, that girl could eat.

“Yeah, I think I may be coming down with something.” She shuffled around in her room. “Just go on without me.”

“Do you want me to run something back before going to training?” I didn’t want to push her into talking to me, but I wished she would go ahead and open up. Ugh, I didn’t know what I should do.

“Actually, that sounds good.” Her voice perked a little at the suggestion. “Uh, If you don’t mind.”

“Girl, I wouldn’t have offered if I didn’t want to do it.” I placed my hand on the doorknob, wondering if I should barge in or respect her need for privacy. “Can I come in?”

“No, please don’t.” She sniffed and moved some more. “I’m going to take a shower, so when you’re back, I’ll be in the den.”

“Okay, be back in a few.” I hated strolling away, but I needed to respect her privacy. At this point, it didn’t seem to be anything harmful, so I was going to let it go … at least for the moment.

I made my way downstairs and out of the building. It didn’t take long for me to reach the cafeteria, and I found the guys at our normal table. I headed over to Rage and kissed his lips briefly. I’d missed him last night, but he wanted to be at his dorm for Cole just like I needed to be at mine for Jess because he was acting strange too.

“I missed you last night.” His hand ran through the back of my ponytail. “I snuck out and came over.”

“Yeah, I bet.” Cole snickered as he took a long sip from his mug. “It’s kinda gross you guys talking about that here.”

“Only you would take it there.” Damien rolled his eyes as he took a huge bite of scrambled eggs.

“Yeah, cause I’m unique like that.” Cole nodded and patted himself on the chest.

“No, because you have the humor of a fifth-grade boy.” Rage turned back toward the table and took a drink of water.

“Where’s Jess?” Cole moved so he could see behind me. “Is she hiding behind you?”

“Dude, she’s not that small.” Damien grabbed his bacon and pointed it at him. “Seriously, that’s called discrimination.”

“What? Calling someone short?” Cole leaned back in his seat and wagged his pointer finger back and forth. “If that’s discrimination, then when you talk about how badass you are, that must be too.”

“I never …” Damien lifted his thumbs in the air as he pointed back at himself.

“Just stop.” Rage stood and snorted. “It’s Cole logic. It isn’t meant to make sense.” He grabbed my hand and tugged me to the buffet. “I need a break from the crazy.”

“That’s a good thing. I promised Jess I’d make her a plate and bring it back.” I stood on my tiptoes and kissed his cheek. “Can you make her plate while I make mine?”

“Of course.” Rage grabbed two plates and handed me one. “We’ve eaten with her enough to know what she likes. She’s a creature of habit in that regard.”

He worked on her plate as I filled mine with eggs, bacon, French toast, and hash browns. I was going to need a lot of energy today. From the hints that Damien had been dropping, I’d be fighting Madison again. We’d been working on counter moves for vampire speed. I was hoping that at least I didn’t fall on my ass within five minutes like the last time.

Right as I finished loading my plate, Rage had Jess’s ready too. I was thinking that I should take it back to her before it gets cold.

We made our way back to the table, and I set my plate on the table out of Cole’s reach. “I’m going to run this back to Jess real fast.”

“Do you have time?” Damien arched an eyebrow and glanced at the clock on the wall. “You need to eat so you’re not late to our session.”

Damien was a stickler about being late to things unless it was something he didn’t want to go to. The one time I showed up five minutes late because Rage had distracted me, my work outlasted an hour longer. “I’ll hurry. I don’t want her food to get cold.”

“No, don’t worry about it.” Cole took the last sip of his drink, causing the drink to gurgle. “I’ll take it to her.”

“But I …” I wasn’t sure if that was a good idea or not.

“Let him take it.” Rage slid the plate over to him. “You’ve got training and need sustenance to get through it.”

“I’ve gotta take care of my girls.” Cole winked as he stood and grabbed the plate. “I’ll catch ya later.”

Usually, I wouldn’t care about not being the one to take it to her, but with how odd she was acting, I was afraid she might get upset.

“Maybe I should …”

“Look, Rage is right.” Damien grabbed a napkin and wiped his mouth. “You’re up against Madison again today. Eat up.”

I’d figured that was the case, but him confirming it made my stomach sink a little. Yeah, I was better prepared to fight her, but there was a good chance she could kick my butt. Not bothering to respond, I grabbed my fork and began chowing down.

“Did he ever tell you anything last night?” Rage took the last few bites of sausage on his plate.

“The only thing I got out of him is that he hurt Jess’s feelings and hates it.” Damien shrugged and leaned back in his seat. “I’m not sure what about, but he said that he needed to fix it.” He glanced at me. “Did she say something to you?”

“No, but she’s not acting like herself.” My stomach soured, but I pushed through and kept eating. “I’ll try to drag it out of her when I get back.”

“That’s probably a good idea,” Damien said, “And with the Christmas break coming up, maybe they’ll get some much-needed time and space apart.”

That was another thing I was dreading. “Yeah, most everyone is leaving Friday. When will you?” I was hoping that he might hang around like he did last year, but that was only because I couldn’t leave campus. He had stayed to train me over the break since his family lived close by and only visited them on Christmas day. Even though I could go home this time, since I broke from the pack, I figured I needed to keep some distance for a little while.

“Yeah, I’m leaving Friday too. When are you two heading home?”

“Same.” Rage glanced at me and smiled. “That works for you, right?”

Great, I was going to get stuck alone for at least a week. I’d have to figure out something to keep myself entertained. “Whenever you need to go.” To be honest, I didn’t know much about Rage’s family except that he had a younger brother who lived at home with his parents.

“Were you not listening the other day?” Rage smirked and rubbed his chin.

“Yeah, you asked what I was doing over break, and I said nothing.” It was the other day when we had been heading to class. “Also, you said that you were heading home early Friday.”

“Yes, and I said my family couldn’t wait to meet you.” Rage leaned over, getting close to me.

“Wait …” Maybe I wouldn’t have to be alone after all. “Were you asking me to go home with you?”

“Of course.” Rage scooted closer to me and grinned. “You’re going to, right? Otherwise, we can hunker down somewhere together.”

I shouldn't be surprised. We were true mates, but I hated to impose on his family or ask him to stay with me. "If they are okay with me coming back with you, I'd love to."

"Mom is beside herself." Rage pulled at the collar of his maroon polo shirt. "So be prepared."

"It sounds perfect." I leaned over and kissed his lips. "I can't wait."

"Alright, this is kind of awkward for me. I'm going to head up to the clearing." Damien stood and grabbed his plate. "Hurry up and eat. Madison just left the cafeteria."

"Great, I can't wait." I cut another piece of French toast. For some reason, despite my impending doom with Madison, I was feeling pretty good.

AS I HEADED through the last little bit of the woods that led me to the clearing, I couldn't help but feel nervous. Last time Madison had kicked my ass. That was the only way to phrase it, it had been that bad.

The clearing came into view, and of course, the first thing I see is Madison in a dark red sports bra with black exercise pants. Her blood-red fingernails twisted her hair into a messy bun and slipped the black ponytail holder off her wrist, securing it in place.

Her fingernails were always that color. She either had to reapply it every night or somehow gotten them to stay that color permanently.

"I smell a dog." Madison cooed as I took a step into the clearing.

"Well, I smell a leech." Both her and Jordan's attitude grated on my nerves. "Small world, isn't it?"

Damien coughed, trying to hide his chuckle. "Alright now, play nice."

"I thought the smack talk was supposed to be getting us in the right mood." Maybe if I didn't act as nervous, I'd feel more confident. Maybe …

"Awe, that's cute." Madison tilted her head and smirked. "See, I don't have to pregame in order to want to kick your ass."

"Well, I don't think you're cute, so I guess it's kind of even." The first thing she was going to do was try to take me off guard.

It was as if she'd heard my thoughts. She rushed me, her figure blurring.

Luckily, my training took over. I lifted my right leg, kicking it straight out in front of me. Madison's chest ran straight into it, and her right uppercut didn't reach me. Her body bounced off my foot a little. I pushed off my left leg and spun, kicking her right in the face.

Her head whipped back, and blood poured from her nose. "You bitch!" Her hand reached up and touched her injury. When she pulled

it away, sticky blood clung to her fingers. “You’re going to pay for that.”

“Remember to keep it clean, ladies,” Damien called from several feet away.

I wasn’t stupid enough to divert my attention from the fight. It was going to be hard enough to keep up with tracking her movements.

Again, she charged me, but I noticed her leg beginning to stretch out into a kick.

Somehow, I squatted just in time to miss her attack and kicked my leg out, making her land hard on her ass.

Her pale green eyes filled with hatred. “You’re going down.” Instead of charging me, she stood and walked over to me. “Now it’s on.”

She blurred, but I had no time to glimpse what her target was. She hit me square in the jaw, and I stumbled back. Warm blood trickled down my chin, but I refused to be distracted. Tears threatened my eyes, but there was no way in hell I’d have let her see that. I cupped my jaw, acting like it hurt more than it did.

A smirk spread across her face as she stepped forward as if my blood called to her. “Did that hurt?”

Instead of responding, I punched with my free hand, hitting her square in the nose again. A loud sickening crack filled the air. “You broke my nose.”

That was one of the things that many humans had wrong. They think of vampires as indestructible, but their bones can break just like anyone else’s. It’s harder to do but possible. They just heal at a faster rate like all supernaturals do.

My jaw was killing me, and I couldn’t waste energy on being snarky.

Madison screamed a warrior cry and came in full-force. Her incisors elongated as she charged me full-throttle. She wasn’t holding back.

The shift overtook my body. My bones began to break, and my clothes ripped as I changed into my wolf form.

She hadn’t expected the shift and stumbled a few steps. She spun back around and clenched her fists so hard that her fingernails cut into her palms. “I’m going to kill you, mutt.” She marched over to me, her chest heaving with every breath.

Not wanting to be on the defensive, I growled and made my eyes fixate on her leg. I couldn’t let her know where I was planning to strike. I charged her and went straight for her neck.

She moved her leg but quickly caught on since I had jumped higher. She threw her hands up.

I wound up flying backward, landing hard against a branch. I

whimpered as I quickly got back on all four paws. She was too fast, so I didn't have any time to recover.

"Alright, that's enough." Damien stepped in between us.

"Like hell it is." She lifted the back of her hand to her nose, wiping off the blood that was trickling from it.

The scent was sweet, not metallic. I learned that shortly after I bit Cole's hand when I first got here. Vampire blood tastes like the most delectable chocolate you've ever tasted.

"She's going to die." Madison began to blur, but Damien must have expected it. Somehow, he caught her around the waist and threw her on the ground.

"This fight is over." Damien's voice took on the alpha edge he rarely used.

"I don't have to listen to you." Madison slowly climbed back onto her feet. "You aren't anything to me."

That's what I hated so much about this school. There were so many entitled people thinking that they were on top. Although, what most of them didn't realize was that there was more to being a strong leader than being a jackass or being able to do whatever they wanted. Maybe it was fortunate that I grew up so far removed because I'd have hated to act like one of them.

"Don't make me kick your ass." Damien's eyes glowed even more than usual. "Because I can, and I will."

"Fine." She stomped and clenched her hands into fists. "But she will pay for breaking my nose."

"You injured her too." He stepped toward me, moving into a protective stance that wasn't too obvious. "Go on and head back. You both need a time-out before sparring again."

"If you think time is going to erase me wanting to get even with her, then you're sadly mistaken." She raised her right hand, gingerly touching her nose.

"Go get it set before it heals crooked." Damien's shoulders were tensed as if he expected her to strike any minute.

Madison focused on me before taking a deep breath. She then turned on her heels, facing in the direction of the school, and vanished before me once more.

"You did amazing." Damien faced me as his face spread into a small grin. "You did a hell of a lot better than I expected. Why don't you shift back?"

He had to be kidding. I ripped my clothes when I changed into my wolf. I shook my wolf head no, hoping he could figure it out.

It took a second, but realization dawned on him. "You don't have any clothes, do you? Hold on." He grabbed his phone from his back pocket and clicked on a number. He held it to his ear, and after a few

rings, someone must have answered. “Hey, bring Raven some clothes to change into when she shifts back.” He hung up and looked at me. “Rage is on his way.”

At least one of my problems was solved, but there was no telling what tomorrow might bring. I half expected for Madison to try killing me in my sleep.

Chapter Thirteen

Friday morning had arrived, Rage and I were riding in Cole's car once more. I sat shotgun and watched the trees pass as Cole ran his mouth in the background.

It was strange. The past few pivotal moments of my life had involved his car in one way or another; coming to the academy, picking out dresses for the dance that sealed mine and Rage's mate bond, my visit home and leaving the pack, and now meeting Rage's family.

We were heading south of Birmingham, more specifically Oak Mountain State Park. Apparently, it was a huge park used by their pack as their running grounds. I googled the park last night, and it looked magical. It was over nine hundred acres of woods with a large river running through. There were trails for the humans and a camping ground, but Rage said that the space is so large it felt like it was only his wolf and the woods.

"So you're taking Ravey to meet the parentals." Cole glanced in the mirror, grinning at Rage. "Maybe I should stay so I can fend off all the heartbroken canines."

I took a deep breath, trying to keep my irrational jealousy from coming to a head. It wasn't right to get mad at him for his past.

"You're a real asshole." Rage growled and hit the back of Cole's headrest, causing Cole to jerk forward.

"I said canines." Cole's voice rose to a whine. "Not pups."

"Either way, it's not funny." Rage leaned back in his seat with his arms crossed. "You're being disrespectful to both Raven and me."

"Fine, I'm sorry." Cole reached over and touched my shoulder. "I didn't mean to upset you."

"What about me?" Rage reached over and smacked Cole's hand off my shoulder.

"You?" Cole shook his hand that Rage had just hit. "When did you get to be a blubbering emotional being? I hate that I might have upset Raven, not you." He stuck his tongue out.

Sometimes I wondered how the two of them could be friends. There were times where they would insult each other back and forth. When I asked, Cole explained it as bro code. I wasn't not even sure what that meant.

"I'm fine." I could tell Rage was upset. Most wolves were super territorial of their mates and got extremely upset when they think of their mate with someone else. I was, but at the end of the day, I was in the wrong. "I don't like thinking about it, but it is what it is. His

past made him the perfect mate for me now and in the future. I can't get upset about what made him just right for me."

"Sometimes I wonder if you're even a wolf?" Cole leaned over and sniffed me. "But I've seen you in wolf form, and you smell like one."

"Not all wolves act the same." Most did, I had to give him that, but now was a good time to tease him. "Don't box me into the stereotype."

"I couldn't box you in anything even if I tried." Cole lifted a hand in the air. "That's one reason why I love ya."

"Awe, I love you too." I couldn't imagine life without him and the others now. In that alternate reality, I wouldn't have been happy like I was in that moment. "You're like family to me."

"To think, we had to basically force her to come with us that first time." Cole patted his hand on the steering wheel.

"There was no way I was leaving without her." Rage chuckled and shook his head. "When my eyes landed on her, I knew she was my mate and thought I was going crazy when she didn't respond."

"Did you?" For some reason, that surprised me. I thought he felt it after I synced with my wolf like I had.

"Of course." Rage put his arm on the armrest as his fingers brushed my shoulder.

"Yeah, I can attest to that." Cole snickered. "As soon as we got back, he shot Ashley down."

"We know how that story goes." Rage grumbled and leaned back. "But that night at the dance, the pull was undeniable, and I could see you felt the same. It took everything in my power not to rip Greg into shreds."

"It might have been more entertaining if you had." Cole reached over and messed with the radio dials, turning on some indie station. "Probably, next time we should. I'll help you too. We can turn that mutt into a puppet with our awesomeness."

"I left the pack so …" It was strange. I thought I'd feel lonely being rogue. Somehow it hadn't bothered me much at all.

"Yeah, but your parents are there." Rage let out a big sigh. "We'll need to go visit sometime."

He was right, but I wasn't quite ready. My parents couldn't have known anything about the crescent necklace. At the same time, I wondered how that was possible. "I know. I just need more time."

We got off the interstate, following the signs to the state park. The closer we got, the more my stomach felt unsettled. I'd never met Rage's parents before, so what if they didn't like me. We were staying the weekend for Christmas, but what if we didn't hit it off. I had to take my mind off of this. "Are you and Jess okay?"

Cole's hand stilled on the steering wheel. "I did something stupid."

His normal cheerful demeanor vanished. “Don’t worry. We’ll figure it out.”

Great, he didn’t want to tell me either. “I wish one of you would talk to me.”

“It’s kind of complicated.” Cole, for once, was watching his words. It was like I could see the wheels spinning in his head. “But don’t you worry your pretty face about it.”

“I just want to help.” It was that simple.

“You’re a fixer, babe.” Rage placed his hands on my shoulders and began to rub. “That’s one of the reasons I love you. Your kind heart.”

“That’s one reason why we all love you.” Cole winked at me even though there was no mirth on his face. “Sometimes things aren’t broken but not quite right either. There isn’t a right or wrong answer even if it appears that there is.”

It sounded as if he was speaking in gibberish, but this was a rare moment when Cole was being serious. “That doesn’t make any sense.”

“Let’s say, a man robbed a store. He took all the food and money.” Cole lifted a finger. “Most people would say that’s wrong.”

“Of course it is.” Robbing anything wasn’t acceptable.

“But what if I told you it’s because he lost his job two weeks ago. His child was crying because she was hungry and didn’t have a home. Does that change your opinion at all?” Cole arched an eyebrow.

He got me there. “I’d say it doesn’t sound nearly as bad.”

“It’s all about perception.” Cole reached over and tapped me on my nose. “Remember that. Things aren’t always as they seem.”

“Wow, Cole. Did you watch a Hallmark movie or stay in a Holiday Inn last night?” Rage chuckled at his joke.

“Don’t hate, hater.” Cole shook his finger at him. “Jealousy does not look good on you.”

“Believe me, I’m not jealous,” Rage said, “I have the hottest girl in the world as my mate.”

“Touché.” Cole turned on a road, and the trees began to thicken. “I can give you that one. But since she’s my bestie, that means I get all the snuggles I want.”

“No, that’s not true.” Rage pretend growled. “If you touch my woman, I’ll have to kick your ass.”

“You couldn’t catch me even if you tried, mutt.” Cole glanced at me and grinned. “The last time he tried, he ran circles in the woods for over an hour. Long story short, I won the bet.”

“That’s because you got there earlier and ran around making everything smell like you.” Rage crossed his arms and frowned. “You cheated.”

“No, that’s called a calculated move. It’s smart.” Cole lifted his pointer finger to his head and tapped a few times. “You’re just pissed

because you didn't expect it."

"How long ago was this?" That definitely does sound like something Cole would do. "How could you not expect that from him."

"That was during our first week at Bloodshed together." Rage let out a long breath and closed his eyes. "I was a little naive at first."

"Aren't we all?" Even after all the whispering I had heard growing up about the college, I wasn't prepared for this life at all.

"Yeah, but our parents warned us." Rage frowned. "Cole's little trick was my wake up call."

"See, I saved your life." Cole brushed his nails against his shirt. "That's how much of a hero I am."

"Taking credit for saving my life is pushing it too far." Rage punched the back of his seat again.

"You never know how the spiral would've gone if I hadn't outsmarted you that day." Cole slowed and turned down a narrow road. It was only large enough for one car. "Anyways, if my car gets messed up from a head-on collision, you're paying for the damages. Poor Betsy deserves better than this."

"Betsy will be fine." Rage leaned forward and pointed right ahead. "Our house will come into view soon. It's the first one you travel to since my Dad is alpha."

Even though his words didn't surprise me, their status took me by surprise. I mean it was a given since his dad and mom had gone to the academy. Only me and Jess were the outliers, but it hadn't fully sunk in—until now. "Okay."

As we turned the corner, a large fence with a gate appeared. It had a stone guard-like station and Cole pulled up to a keypad. He typed in the numbers 4786, and the gate slowly began to open.

"You've been here before, haven't you?" I figured he'd been here before since he knew his way here. For some reason, I hadn't expected him to know the code.

"Oh, yeah. I've spent some holidays here among the Jackson pack." He pulled through the gate and followed the road.

Not more than a few seconds drive, a large brick building came into view. It was two stories high with a round circular driveway in front. The familiar feeling of Rage being out of my league plagued me.

"It's not as big as it looks." Cole nudged me with his shoulder as he pulled into the circle. "It's bigger."

"You're an ass." The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

"Hey, I was trying to make you laugh." Cole stopped the car and lifted both hands in the air. "I thought it would make you feel better."

His shit-eating grin proved that he was lying. "Bite me."

"Oh, is that an invitation?" His eyes landed on my neck, and he

licked his lips.

Rage opened my door and lowered his head so he could see Cole. “If any fangs get near her, I’ll cut them out of your mouth.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Cole turned off his car and lifted both hands in the air. “I was just ragging her.” He climbed out of the car. “No need to get your panties in a wad.”

“I don’t wear panties.” Rage glowered at him.

“Oh, so you’re a commando kind of dude.” Cole paused and grimaced. “Ugh …That was a horrible sight in my head.”

“Stop thinking of me naked.” Rage’s mouth dropped open, and he moved me so I stood in front of him like a buffer. “Like seriously.”

“I didn’t mean for it to happen. You were the one who said you didn’t wear panties.” Cole cringed and grabbed his head. “Oh, my eyes.”

The front door opened, and it had to be Rage’s brother, Stone. His hair was a shade lighter than Rage’s; a dark chestnut. “What the hell is going on out here?” His dark brown eyes were focused right on Cole.

“I’m picturing your brother …”

“Stop right there.” Rage grabbed my waist and pulled me close. “If you say another word, I’ll be forced to kick your ass.”

“Promises. Promises.” Cole gave him a wicked grin. “You’d have to be able to catch me first.”

“Is he still harping about that?” Stone leaned against the doorframe and rolled his eyes.

“Yes, he is.” Rage kept his arms around my waist. “He fails to mention that every time I ask for a rematch, he won’t do it.”

“Why rematch when I won the first time?” Cole patted his shoulders and moved his head. “

“Sounds to me like someone might be a little scared.” Cole was too cocky about the whole thing.

“You’re siding with him?” Cole’s arms dropped and he pouted. “Ravey, you’re supposed to be my girl.”

“First off, that was over three years ago, and you’re still talking crap about it.” Everyone knows why he’s doing it. “I mean, if you know you can win, why be so resistant to try it again?”

“What, she’s your girl?” Stone’s forehead creased, and his eyes landed on Rage’s arms around me. “I thought she was your mate, Rage?”

“She is.” Rage pulled me closer against him. “She’s one of Cole’s friends too, and you know how he has boundary issues.”

“That’s … interesting.” He took a step inside and motioned us in. His eyes scanned me over. “Mom. Rage, Cole, and the girl are here.”

Great, now he thought I was a hussy. Meeting his family had

already started out so promising.

Chapter Fourteen

Rage grabbed my hand and pulled me through the door with him. Cole bounced behind me with his smirk securely in place. He was going to embarrass me further. I could just tell.

Walking inside led us straight into the living room. The house appeared immaculate. The floors were a dark bamboo and the house had an earthy feel to it. A white couch was placed right in front of a gray, stone fireplace with two white love seats on the sides. One step inside the house confirmed it all. Rage was definitely way above my league.

"Do I smell Rage and his rambunctious vampire friend?" A silky feminine voice floated into the room. She appeared in the opening just a few feet away. Her dark green eyes widened when they landed on Rage. "Oh, how I've missed you so much." She wrapped her long arms around him, her long, dark hair falling over his shoulder.

I moved a few steps away, not wanting to interfere with their moment. Of course, Cole stepped next to me and winked.

Stone arched an eyebrow as he glanced between Cole and me.

His mom pulled back and glanced at me. "And you must be Raven."

For some reason, I hadn't expected them to know about me. I hadn't ever questioned Rage last year when he came to spend Christmas day with me. I was ecstatic to have him with me and never wondered what he had told his parents.

"Of course, this is our Ravey." Cole wrapped an arm around me and smiled.

"Our?" A smirk spread across her heart-shaped face as she glanced at her eldest son. "I didn't realize you'd gotten good at sharing finally."

"Mom." Stone shook his head. "You're okay with this?"

"Oh, come on now, honey." She waved Stone off. "You should know how Cole messes with us. Rage wouldn't even share a pack of gum with you. Do you honestly think he'd share his mate?"

"Did you think that?" Rage's eyes widened, and he glanced at his brother. He grabbed my hand and gently tugged me back to him.

"If this wasn't awkward before, it really is now." Stone lifted his hands and sighed. "And I don't want to talk about sharing with Mom here."

I shouldn't have been surprised. We should've known that Cole would be up to something. He liked going for shock value.

"Oh, well then, who do you want to talk about sharing with?" A

small grin played at the corners of her mouth.

"Just stop." Stone cringed. "Please."

"I've got to agree on that one." Rage shook a finger at Cole. "She is my mate. Your friend."

"Absolutely." Cole shook his head and then turned to wink at me.

"Leave the poor girl alone." She shooed Cole away. "Go get your stuff and make yourself comfortable."

"Wait." Rage paused, and his brows furrowed together. "Are you spending the break here?"

"Surprise." Cole chuckled and opened the door to head back outside. "My parents got called away on some sacred vampire mission with the top vampire from the UK, and they jetted off to England."

He downplayed it as if it was normal. "And you didn't go with them?"

"Hell no." Cole grimaced and shook his head no. "It's boring stuff. It's like watching a chess match as each opponent takes time to figure out the next move that will top the other. I'd rather be here with real people."

"Rage and Stone, why don't you go get Raven's bags with Cole?" His mom pointed to the red Audi just visible through the window.

"Of course." Stone followed Cole to the car.

"Are you okay?" Rage stayed back and raised his fingers so that they brushed my cheek.

The tenderness of his touch and adoration in his eyes gave much-needed comfort. "Yeah, I'm fine."

"I'll be right back." He dropped his hands and headed to the car.

"I never thought I'd see the day." Mrs. Jackson smiled and turned her attention to me. "So you're the girl who stole my baby's heart."

These moments were strong reminders of how socially inept I was. "It's very nice to meet you, Mrs. Jackson."

"Oh, dear. It's Audrey." She tilted her head as she examined me. "You look like my old best friend from Bloodshed. It's uncanny, but from what Rage says, none of your family went there."

"That's right. I'm from Clarksville." It felt like she was looking into my soul.

"Is your pack upset that you're not coming back for Christmas?"

"Well, I left my pack due to some issues." I kind of wished that Rage had told them all this so I didn't have to.

"Ahh, so that's the reason you guys aren't splitting your time." She reached over and patted my arm. "Well, I'm very happy that you're here. We've been begging Rage for over a year to bring you home."

"I'm glad to be here too." It was nice meeting the family that raised my mate.

The door opened, and the three guys entered the room again. Rage

had my pink bag and Stone had a huge backpack along with two rolling suitcases. Cole entered last, smiling, with nothing in his hands.

"Is that all your bags?" It was hard to believe that Cole had three bags to my one, but Rage told me he didn't need to pack seeing as all of his stuff was here.

"This is a judgment-free zone just like Planet Fitness." He narrowed his eyes at me. "I see what you're trying to do."

There was no reasoning with the insane. I focused my attention on Rage. "Why is your brother carrying all of Cole's bags?"

"Because Cole said he wasn't strong enough to handle it." Rage sighed and shook his head. "Somehow, Stone hasn't learned yet."

"What?" Stone turned toward Cole and frowned. "You knew I could do it? You just wanted me to carry your bags?"

"It's all about perception." Cole held out his hands from his body. "Was I being lazy? Perhaps. But, I did you a favor."

This should be good.

"How so?" Stone stepped away from the bags and placed Cole's backpack on the floor.

"Well, your name makes me think of gargoyles, which are strong." Cole motioned up and down Stone's body. "Although your build makes me wonder."

"We have similar builds." Stone furrowed his brows together.

"I already know I'm strong. Many ladies have told me this." He waved his hand over his body. "But you, not so much, I had to test you."

"I'm not so sure you can call them ladies." I couldn't help interjecting. "I mean, these are also the same ones that you swore loved being called hos."

Audrey mashed her lips together, but her shoulders shaking gave her away.

"Not relevant to this conversation, so please hold any additional commentary until further notification." He stuck his tongue out at me, stepping in between Stone and me. "Sorry about that rude interruption. Now you've proven to me that you're stronger than you look."

"But I wasn't worried about how I looked." Stone crossed his arms.

"Not true, bro." Rage rolled his eyes. "You carried all of those bags to prove that you can be easily manipulated into doing work that someone else doesn't want to do."

"Hmm … When you put it that way, he may become my new best friend." Cole's mouth spread into an evil grin. "I'm so tired. I bet you can't carry me up the stairs to my room."

"Forget you." Stone turned around and opened the door once more. "I'm going to help Dad with pack duties."

When the door shut, Cole sighed. “You just couldn’t be nice to your brother.”

“Me?” Rage grabbed my hand and led me to the small hallway on the right. “Don’t even try to place that on me.”

“Wait.” Cole pointed at his luggage. “Aren’t you going to take mine?”

“No.” Rage didn’t even bother to turn his head in Cole’s direction.

“You’re just not right.” Audrey giggled and patted Cole on his arm. “I’m so glad you’re staying with us this holiday.”

“At least one of you appreciates me.” Cole winked at her and placed his arm around her shoulders. “So since the hubs is preoccupied, why don’t we …”

I couldn’t believe him. “He has no boundaries.”

“Did it finally sink in?” Rage laughed as a stairway opened up on the left. “We’ve been saying that for a while.”

“I think it finally has.” It’s sad that it took Cole flirting with Rage’s mom to finally get me there.

We made it up the stairs. There was a large bathroom straight ahead, a door on the left, and two on the right side. All the walls of his house were painted various shades of gray. The house was simple but gorgeous.

“Alright, here’s our room.” He opened the door on the left and motioned for me to enter.

“Wait … ours?” I had to have misheard him.

He covered his mouth with his hand, but the edges of his eyes crinkled revealing the smile. “Yes … ours.”

“But we’re at your parents’ house.” They couldn’t be okay with this right? I already felt weird even though I couldn’t pinpoint why.

“You do realize we’re mated.” Rage reached out and tucked a stray piece of my chestnut hair behind my ear. “I mean, we can’t get any more serious than that.”

“You’re right. I’m being silly.” I didn’t know what was wrong with me. I felt like I was regressing to how I felt when starting at Bloodshed. I moved past him and entered the room. “I’m just so nervous.”

There was a king-size bed against the middle of the wall, framed by dark cherry furniture. To the right of the room was a private bathroom.

“There is no reason for you to be nervous.” Rage entered the room and placed my backpack by the bed. “Come here.” He took my hands and pulled me so that both of us sat on the bed. “You are my mate, and I love you. That’s all anyone needs to know.”

“But what if your parents hate me?”

“Then screw them.” Rage lowered his head and brushed his lips

against mine. “Though they’re not going to because you’re an incredible person all on your own. I’m just your arm candy.”

I couldn’t hold my giggle in. He knew exactly how to put me at ease. “I love you.” I placed my hand on his neck and brought him back to my lips. I deepened our kiss and pulled back after a minute.

“I love you too.” He brushed his fingers over my lips and smiled.

“My turn.” Cole sauntered into the room and grabbed my waist, hoisting me back on my feet. “You just need to wipe your lips off first. I don’t want to indirectly kiss Rage.”

“Hey.” Rage pointed at Cole. “Don’t make me get up.”

“Look, I’ll admit you’re attractive for a guy, but women are more my thing.” Cole tapped my nose. “Especially hot ones like Ravey.”

“Aw, are you wanting a kiss?” I was thankful that Cole was going to be here. He may have been a pain in the ass, but he’d help me feel more comfortable.

“Hells, yeah.” Cole moved his neck from side to side. “Give me some lovin’.” He puckered his lips, which reminded me of a duck. “Rage watch me steal your girl.”

I leaned toward him and gave him a big sloppy kiss on his cheek. “How’s that?”

“Would’ve been better if it were on my lips.” His cheek glistened from my saliva. “At least I know Rage won’t ever be thirsty. You could water a whole damn town.”

“Asshole.” I laughed, smacking him on the arm.

“That’s what you get for making a move on her.” Rage stood behind me and wrapped his arms around my waist. “Now leave us be.”

A hint of musk clung in the air as Stone appeared in the doorway. “Hey, Dad’s home and wanting to see y’all.”

“Of course he does.” Cole motioned to the door and smiled. “Come on, guys. Daddy’s home.”

“I told you never to say that again.” Rage took my hand and pulled me to the door.

As we walked into the living room again, Audrey stood next to her husband at a small bar table that was at the back of the room and turned as we entered. “And there they are.”

Rage’s dad’s back was to us as he poured some whiskey into a glass. “I can’t wait to meet the infamous Raven.” His hair was dark, and his build was similar to Rage. When he turned around, his dark brown eyes widened. “Dear God, she’s the spitting image of Liz.”

My stomach dropped, and I took a deep breath. How did they know my mom?

Chapter Fifteen

"I thought the same thing about her." Audrey took a few tentative steps toward me. "I mean there are a few subtle differences, but that's it."

"How do you know my mom?" The words tumbled out even though it sounded as if someone else asked them.

"No, there is no way that can be." Audrey shook her head as she placed a hand on her heart. "She disappeared, and no one could track her. We all thought she was dead."

All of a sudden, cold realization crashed over me.

Rage placed a hand on my shoulder. "This could all just be coincidental. I've heard you speak of Liz in the past and her last name was Cromwell, not Wright."

"Oh, that can't be my mom." Some of the terror evaporated, and I took a deep breath. "Her last name was Grayson."

"Well, then it's all just a coincidence." Audrey gave me a sad smile. "I won't lie. I kind of hoped you were her daughter. She was my best friend and vanished from the Academy one night."

"Well, if Raven looks like her, she was damn hot." Cole bumped shoulders with Rage. "Am I right?"

"Just ignore him." Rage whispered into my ear even though everyone in the room could hear. "He feeds off attention."

"That is a blatant lie." Cole grabbed his chest and closed his eyes. "I need blood to survive."

"Well, I'm glad you're all here." Rage's dad took a swig of his drink and set the cup on the table. He reached his hand out to me. "It's nice to finally meet you."

"Nice to meet you too, Mr. Jackson." I hated to be formal, but this was the first time meeting them.

"It's Matthew to you." He winked at me and grabbed his cup again. "The pack is super excited to meet Rage's infamous mate."

"Yeah, it's hard to believe he committed to someone." Stone entered the room and sat on the love seat.

"When they see her, they'll understand." Rage grinned and leaned over, kissing my cheek.

"Oh, gag me." Stone wrinkled his nose. "I'm not sure if I can stomach this."

"Be nice." Audrey arched an eyebrow. "This could be you someday."

"Don't worry about it, man." Cole strode to the couch and sat. "After seeing them like that for so long, you become immune. It took a

while for me to get comfortable chatting as they make out, but I pushed through it."

"We aren't that bad." A giggle escaped me. He always had to be so dramatic.

"Almost." Cole nodded his head.

"If you guys are ready, the pack wants to see you and meet Raven." Matthew finished off his drink.

Rage glanced at me, letting me make the call.

"Sure, let's go." I couldn't wait to meet the others.

IT WASN'T LONG until we made our way to the clearing of the neighborhood. All the pack members' houses were nice. There was a section in the center with a pond and trees surrounding it. Cute picnic benches were scattered around the pond.

A group of people was waiting in the center. There were at least fifty people of various ages standing around.

Whispers filled my ears as we made our way to the edge of the pond. Even though my hand was securely in Rage's, I felt as if I was on display.

"Wow, the overwhelming scent of pups kinda makes me nauseous." Cole wrinkled his nose and waved his hand, trying to dispel the air.

"And your scent of sweet mold makes me gag." Rage grumbled. "But yet, here you are."

A tall lean guy around our age hurried in our direction. "Rage, man. It's good to see you." He wore a flannel shirt with a thin, black jacket over it. His jeans fit perfectly with a black belt emphasizing his lean waist. His jade green eyes scanned me over. "And who is this girl?" He winked at me.

If Jess was here, she'd be melting for this guy. He was gorgeous, but he didn't hold a candle to my mate. "I'm Raven." I held my hand out toward him, and he grabbed it, shaking.

"She's my mate." Rage slapped his friend's back and then gave him a side hug. "So, no flirting."

"Damn, I'm jealous." He let go of my hand and took a step back. "It's nice to meet ya. I'm one of his oldest friends."

"His dad is the beta here." Rage pointed over to the man standing next to his father.

It was easy to see they were related. The man next to Matthew was a few inches taller but leaner and less muscular.

"I'm Ryder." His friend grinned at me. "My dad over there is Charlie."

"It's very nice to meet you." His presence was calming, and his

friendly demeanor was comforting.

"When Matthew told us the news that Rage had found his true mate, it was hard to believe." He punched Rage in the arm. "A few of the girls here tried to grab his attention while growing up, but he never batted an eye in their direction."

"He must have been questioning his sexuality." Cole pursed his lips and nodded.

"What? No." Rage's eyes widened, and he shook his head. "That's not it."

"It's okay. It's natural for a lot of guys." Cole grinned and shook his head. "Just like you tried looking at my penis that one night."

Oh, dear god. There was no telling where this was going.

"No, that's not how it happened." Rage lifted his free hand and pointed at Cole accusingly. "You were the one who wanted to show Damien and me how big your junk was."

"It's strange." As much as Cole tried being unpredictable, it only made him more predictable. "Somehow, we've had this conversation before."

"It's worth talking about." Cole stood straight with a proud grin on his face. "Tell them, Rage."

"Dude, no." Rage pulled me close and buried his face in my hair. "I'm trying to block that memory from my brain."

His earthy scent filled my nose, and this moment was perfect. However, I couldn't help feeling an ache about not seeing my parents for another Christmas.

"So what did you do?" A huge smile spread across Ryder's face.

"Well, I first came in the room Tom Cruise style, sporting tighty-whities." Cole's face beamed as he told his story.

Rage tugged my hand and led me to where his Dad stood. "Let's go over here so you can meet Charlie. That story is a nightmare, and I don't want to relive the memory."

We weaved around a few girls who murmured hello to Rage and stared as I walked by. He didn't even bother turning his head in their direction as he guided me through the shifters.

"Is it a good idea to have a vampire here with all of us?" Charlie's back was toward us as his voice was hushed, talking to Rage's dad.

"He's one of my son's friends, so of course, he's welcome here." Matthew turned his head, diverting his attention to us. "And of course, we needed to welcome Raven to our pack."

"What?" I couldn't have heard that right.

Charlie turned and smiled at me. "I'm so glad Rage found his true mate. I can only hope Ryder is blessed with the same opportunity. I'm Charlie, the beta of the Jackson pack. It's amazing news that you'll be joining us."

“Dad, I never said she wanted to join the pack.” Rage’s body tensed, and he took a step closer so that our bodies touched.

“Didn’t you say she was a rogue?” Matthew's forehead creased, and he scratched his neck. “She needs a pack, I assumed she would join ours. It makes sense that you two would be in the same pack.”

When he put it that way, it made sense. Strangely though, I hadn’t felt like a rogue wolf. I hadn’t felt depressed, lonely, or out of sync either.

“That’s her choice, and I’ll respect her wishes.” Rage’s voice took the low, raspy tone that was dead sexy.

“Of course.” Matthew lifted both hands in the air and focused on me. “I’m sorry if I assumed wrong. We’d love for you to join our pack, but don’t feel obligated.”

Choosing a pack was a big deal. We had to find one with an alpha that we believed in and one that felt natural. It definitely wasn’t something a person should do without thinking it through. The pack I left was the one I had been born into, and look how that had turned out. “It’s something I need some time to think about. I’m honored that you’d welcome me with open arms.”

“Of course. Another Bloodshed Academy alumnus is always welcome here.” Charlie smiled and then stepped closer to Rage and me, his voice a low whisper. “Why did you bring that vampire here again?”

That irked me. “Because he’s one of our best friends, and we wanted to spend Christmas with him.” I’d be damned if I admitted it was because his family left to do political stuff. Cole didn’t speak of his family often and normally tried to change the subject when they were brought up. Some things were starting to make sense to me.

“It’s just …” Charlie’s eyes widened, and he glanced around, waving his hand up and down telling me to lower my voice. “He’s not one of us.”

A deep chuckle resonated from Rage’s chest.

“Oh, you don’t consider a vampire a supernatural?” Cole was the first one I met from the Academy and protected me. There was no way in hell I’d let someone bad mouth him like that.

“Well, of course he is …”

“Then he’s our kind.” It was that simple. There was no reason to make it more than it was.

“I see she takes the same view as you.” Matthew frowned as he stepped slightly in between us and Charlie. “I agree with Charlie, son. It’s strange having a vampire here with all these shifters.”

“We go to school with all kinds. Why should our home be any different?” Rage’s anger was evident in his tone. “You even like him.”

“I’m not saying we can’t like him, but to purposely hang out with

each other all the time, it's not natural." Matthew sighed and glanced around. "We're making a scene." He shook his head and frowned at Charlie. "You should've known better than to start that right now."

"You're right." Charlie nodded and relaxed his stance. "I'm sorry."

"Is everything okay?" Audrey smiled as she glanced at the four of us. "We are behaving, right?"

"Of course, dear." Matthew leaned over and kissed her cheek.

"Well, then, I'm going to steal Raven away." She smacked Rage away from me and wrapped an arm around my neck. "It's time for her to hang with some girls."

It was nice to get away. I hadn't expected Rage's dad to think that way. "Should I be nervous?"

"No." She leaned her head near mine. "Please don't take Charlie and Matthew to heart. When we went to the academy, there was a small movement for all supernatural kinds to be separate, so that's what's been programmed in their heads. They like Cole, but it's just them worrying about things not following the old ways."

"It did surprise me." These were my mate's parents so I couldn't lie. "But I could understand that a little better. Why don't you feel that way?"

"Because growing up as a pup, my pack was allied to a vampire clan, so I was raised more liberally." She gave me a sad smile. "Remember, you and your mate won't always agree on things, but that doesn't mean you aren't meant for each other."

Rage told me previously that his parents were chosen mates and not true. In this day and age, finding our other half wasn't easy, considering the way all packs had become spread out. I couldn't help but wonder if that wouldn't happen between him and me. "Maybe."

"You'll see. Now, this won't be pleasant, but you need to meet Charlie's wife, Lola. It's imperative that we acclimate you and your role since you and Rage are the future here." We weaved through some people that murmured hello before she slowed to a group of ladies. Two appeared to be close to my age with what had to be their mother.

"Well … hello, Audrey." The older lady's dirty blonde hair hit just past her shoulders, and she stuck her pretentious nose in the air. "Who is this?"

"This is Raven, Rage's mate." Audrey smiled as she pulled me into her body. "This is Charlie's wife and daughters."

The two girls scanned me up and down before frowning. They were both pretty, don't get me wrong, but there was a sense of entitlement to their demeanor.

"Of course he'd pick someone outside of the pack." The one who was a few years older rolled her hazel eyes and frowned. "He always

tries to be different."

That wasn't it at all. "That's not true, he always does what he thinks is right."

"And how was him not asking me to be his mate right?" She flipped her hair over her shoulder and glared.

"Now, Brianna, behave." Her mother glanced at me. "I'm sorry for my girls. Brianna had always hoped that Rage would be hers."

"That's funny because I didn't realize I was someone's property." Rage's raspy voice had an edge. He glared at both Brianna and Lola.

"That's not how we meant it." Lola straightened and took a deep breath.

"I heard the whole thing, and they totally did." Cole stepped on the other side, squeezing in between Audrey and me. "It was like they were trying to pee on you even though Raven is your true mate." His cold blue eyes filled with disgust.

"How in the world would you ever think that was possible?" Rage took a step toward Brianna and wrinkled his nose. "I purposely went out of my way to avoid you and not talk to you when I lived here. Did you think that would change?"

"Now, Rage, please stay calm." His mom bit the bottom of her lip.

"Do you expect me to stay …"

"Listen to your mother." Cole barked out a laugh, looking over these girls up and down. "Do you expect someone like him," Cole said as he pointed to Rage, "would settle for some sorry ass that can't even make it to the academy?"

"Let me make it clear." I expected Rage's pack to be better than this. It was like wherever I went, people disliked me instantaneously. It sucked for them. "He's my true mate, so back the fuck off."

"Now listen here …" Lola's face flushed as she placed a hand on her chest.

"That's enough." Matthew stepped into the circle, and his nostrils flared. "What the hell is going on?"

"It seems Brianna isn't happy that I have a mate." Rage smirked and grabbed my hand.

"Brianna, we've talked about this." Charlie's eyes glowed as he stared at his daughter. "Wolf shifters celebrate when one of our kind finds a mate, especially a true mate."

"But …" She placed a hand on her hip.

"I said that's enough." Matthew's tone had the alpha power laced within it. "This is a time to celebrate, not to do this."

"Let me take Raven around to meet the others, and then we'll head back to our house." Audrey weaved around Cole to get to me and tugged on my arm.

"Fine, but if anyone else starts anything, link me." Rage was tense

with his jaw clenched.

“Of course.” Audrey sighed as we left the group. “I’m sorry about that. Charlie’s family is a little high maintenance, but I hadn’t expected that. Had I known, we wouldn’t have gone over without Matthew and Rage.”

“It’s not your fault.” I hated it when people apologized for something that they didn’t have any control over. “Is anyone else upset about me and Rage?”

“Of course not.” She patted my shoulder. “I knew that Lola and Brianna probably weren't thrilled, but I hadn’t expected that.”

At least the confrontation was over. We were here for a few more days, so there was no telling what else might happen.

Chapter Sixteen

The next few days went by without a hitch. I'd met several others in the pack, and they welcomed me with open arms, which was a great relief after how Brianna and Lola acted.

It was Christmas morning, and I was in bed next to Rage. I had won the argument about sharing a room with him so blatantly in front of his parents. Even though we were mates, we were in college and hadn't performed the mating ceremony that made it official in the wolf and human databases. It was essentially a wedding but with a shifter vibe.

Of course, Rage stayed in a guest room but snuck into my room every night. At first, I pretended to complain, but having him next to me allowed me to sleep better. "Hey, we better get up so your parents don't go looking for you in your room."

He groaned and turned in my direction, pulling my body flush with his. "Can I at least get my Christmas present first?" His hands lowered across my belly and he slipped his fingers under my pajama bottoms.

"No, your mom is already up." It was one thing for them to know our bond was securely in place. Still, the act demonstrating how we did it shouldn't happen on Christmas morning, especially when his family was already up.

"Damn, I'm glad Jess texted you and that we're heading back tomorrow." He kissed my neck, making my body heat in response. "Besides, your musky scent is not helping your cause."

Footsteps close to the stairs were like a bucket of cold water being dumped over me. "Let's go."

"Fine." He chuckled and climbed from the bed. "Let's go. It does sound like Mom and Dad are in the den."

I jumped out of the bed and headed into the bathroom. I quickly changed clothes and ran a brush through my hair. When I went back into the bedroom, Rage had changed into a pair of blue jeans and a red polo shirt. "You ready?"

"Yup." I made my way over to him and stood on my tiptoes, brushing my lips over his. "Merry Christmas." It surprised me when I realized how long we'd been together. It was a little over a year, but it seemed like yesterday. My heart flipped when I was around him, and kissing his lips caused a warm buzzing, which made it just as great as our first one."

He opened the door and held his arm out. "Then let's go." His chocolate eyes smoldered, and his scent filled my nose.

This was one of my most favorite Christmases yet. The only thing that hurt was not seeing my parents.

When we entered the den, the Christmas tree was lit. I couldn't get over how gorgeous it was. It was a rose gold tree with sparkling lights throughout. On top sat a wolf wearing a Bloodshed Academy shirt. At first, I'd found it weird, but when I thought it through, it made sense. We were werewolf shifters, and his parents had met at the school.

"I love Christmas here." Cole came bouncing in, his eyes bright as he sat in front of the tree. "We don't even have a Christmas tree at home."

There weren't many presents under the tree; only a few, but the real present was spending it with two of my best friends in the world.

Stone yawned as he strolled into the room. He sat on the couch right in front of the tree. "We don't have to start so early."

"It's nine in the morning." Cole scoffed. "And Christmas, so this is extremely late."

"Alright, let's begin." Audrey clapped her hands and grabbed a present, giving it to Matthew.

"Fine, but you have to open up your present at the same time." Matthew reached and grabbed the biggest box under the tree.

"That one is mine?" She picked the box up before sitting next to Stone. The shiny wrapping paper caught the lights in the room.

"Only the biggest for my girl." Matthew winked at his wife.

"Is this an appropriate conversation here on Christmas morning?" Cole frowned and waved his finger toward them. "Your kids are in the room too."

"What?" Matthew's forehead creased as he looked at Cole, then the present, and back at Cole again.

"He's being a typical twelve-year-old boy." Audrey giggled and began to open the present.

A wide grin spread across Matthew's face. "Well, even though I hadn't meant it that way, it's a true statement."

"Please, don't do this." Rage buried his face in my hair. "He's going to start offering to show you his so he can prove he's smaller."

"Hell yeah, I will." Then Cole stopped and jumped up. "No, no. Mine is the biggest, I swear. I can show you."

"It seems like he's always wanting to show everyone his penis." I'd lost count of how many times we'd had this same conversation.

"It's a beauty to be … hold." Cole smirked and nodded his head. "Do you wanna grab … I mean see?"

"What the hell is wrong with him?" Stone covered his eyes with his hands. "He's going to pull it out, isn't he?"

Audrey giggled as she watched the terror unfold before her.

"Don't pull that out," Matthew growled. "I want to enjoy my

Christmas morning."

"That's what she said." Cole stood and did a hip thrust.

"You're going to put your back out moving your hips like that." I hadn't meant to say that. I'd just encouraged him to continue down these derailed train tracks.

"Then Rage isn't giving it to you properly." Cole moved beside Rage and tapped him on his shoulder. "I may need to give you some pointers."

"You just had to go there." Rage play growled at me.

"Come on, Ravey." He grabbed my hand, tugging me toward a cream-colored loveseat. "He can watch as I demonstrate for him."

I dug my feet into the carpet.

"Oh, hell no." Rage grabbed me around the waist and pulled me back against him.

"What? I'd be clothed." Cole lifted both hands and shrugged.

"Do you think that somehow makes it better?" Stone scoffed and shook his head. "How can you be friends with him?"

Stone was rather uptight, but I had a few minutes alone with him the other day, and he was personable. For whatever reason, Cole brought the worst out of him. If he grew up with his dad's beta feeling that races shouldn't mix, then it's no wonder he felt that way. I just couldn't help but wonder how Rage broke the mold.

"Because he wouldn't really do it." Rage rolled his eyes at his friend. But just in case, I step in."

"Don't be a poor sport, Stone." Audrey began opening her present. "She isn't even your girl." She unwrapped her present and opened the box, and her mouth dropped open. There inside was a carved wolf made of wood and painted all black with white around its snout and ears. "That's me."

"Do you like it?" Matthew tapped his foot as he waited for her reaction.

"Like it?" Audrey kept her focus on the wolf sitting before her. "I love it."

"I'm glad." He let out a long breath and smiled. "I figured it could go either way."

It was a very thoughtful gift. It was nice to see that Rage's parents loved each other just like mom and dad did. My heart kinda sunk at that thought. I hadn't talked to them in the last couple of months. I'd been avoiding it, and I wasn't quite sure why.

"Alright, it's your turn." She motioned to the present he was holding in his hand.

"Okay." He unwrapped his long rectangle package and opened a jewelry type box. A small grin spread across his face as he pulled out a watch. However, it wasn't like any ordinary watch; instead of a

circle, it was shaped in a wolf's face. "This is perfect."

It didn't take long for Stone to open his presents. Now it was Rage's turn. His parents had given him some new clothes and a laptop. When it was my turn, I got a little nervous. I grabbed the cylinder-shaped present under the tree and handed it to him. "Here you go." I was kind of anxious about the gift, not sure if he would like it or not.

He held it and shook it. "Is that a picture of you?" He grinned at me as he examined the sides.

"Or better yet, a picture of me." Cole piped in. He hadn't gotten a present since he only came last minute, but he didn't seem to care.

Slowly, Rage unwrapped it, and when he removed one of the ends, a map of the United States fell out. He grabbed it and opened it. The words on the top read 'Anywhere With You', and it had a heart placed in New Orleans, Clarksville, and his parents' house.

"It's a way to track where we've been together." I sat next to him on the loveseat and placed my finger on the hearts I'd colored. "I want to travel the world with you. This is one way we can track where we've been and where we need to go."

"Aw, that's so sweet." Cole grinned and walked over to us. "I've been there with you in each place too. So where's my map?"

"First off, I didn't realize you were going to be here or I would've brought your gift." I did feel bad, but there wasn't much else I could do.

"Alright, it's my turn." Rage took a deep breath, and for some reason, his hands shook for a moment.

"I'll grab her gift." Cole cooed as he jumped up and grabbed a small squarish box that wasn't wrapped. "Here." He shoved it in Rage's hand.

"You know it's been over a year since we've known each other, and it's been the best part of my life." He kneeled in front of me.

Oh my God. He couldn't be doing that ...

"I know you're my mate, but I want it official in every way." He opened the box, and a large oval diamond ring with small stones around the band sat nestled within the satin. "Will you marry me?"

My heart felt like it may explode. "Yes."

He grabbed my left hand and slid the ring on, a huge smile on his face.

I wasn't sure how the hell he got it on with how much my hand shook, but it fit perfectly. "It's gorgeous."

"It looks even better on you than I imagined." He stood and grabbed my waist, pulling me flush against him.

"Congratulations." Audrey ran over and wrapped her arms around us. "I'm so glad I got to be part of this."

“Right, me too.” Cole came over and joined the group hug. “I’ve never met a better couple.”

“Man, now my gifts seem lame,” Stone grumbled.

“Your brother just got engaged to his mate.” Matthew reached over and smacked his son on the arm. “You should be happy for him.”

“Of course I am.” Stone gave him a thumbs up. “I’m just glad I get a great sister-in-law from it all.”

In a lot of ways, I already was part of their family, but now we’d have the official mate ceremony and a wedding. When marriage certificates became a thing, shifters began having official mating ceremonies. Essentially, it’s the same thing as a wedding but with a wolf twist.

“Alright, picture time.” Audrey picked up her phone off the table and pointed it in our direction. “Cheese.” Her camera flashed, and she waved her hand back and forth. “Now look at each other.”

Not needing any encouragement, I faced Rage, and my heart sky rocketed. I never imagined I’d be this happy, but now that I was, there was no going back.

The camera flashed again.

“Now, one with me.” Cole placed one hand against my chest and the other against Rage’s and spread us apart. He smiled smugly between us right when the camera went off again.

“Remember when we got engaged?” Audrey dropped her arms and turned to her husband.

“Do you think I wouldn’t remember that day?” Matthew chuckled and stepped toward his wife. “It was the best day of my life.”

“Liz dragged my butt out of bed telling me she needed a run.” Audrey glanced at the ceiling with a small grin. “When we got close to the woods, there was a blanket lying on the ground. Matthew and Jonathan, who you all know as Professor Shaw, had been waiting on us.”

“I was so nervous.” Matthew wrapped an arm around her and leaned over to kiss her on the cheek. “I remember you looked so confused but headed over. I thought I was going to pass out. I couldn’t even focus on anything else.”

“He’s not kidding.” Audrey glanced at us. “I even asked Liz if Matthew was okay. Oh, we even have a picture.”

It was obvious how much Rage’s parents loved each other. It showed that even chosen mates could be the real deal. “Can we see?”

“Of course, let me go get it.” Audrey ran out of the room, heading up the stairs.

“It’s so strange to think of you all hanging out with Professor Shaw.” Cole shook his head and wrinkled his nose. “He’s kinda odd. He always seems annoyed by me. I mean, who thinks like that?”

“Oh, me.” Stone raised his hand.

“It’s called a rhetorical question.” Cole motioned for Stone to lower his hand. “You’re outright lying. I’ll let it slide this one time. I mean, I’m fuc … flipping amazing.” Cole saluted Matthew. “See, I’m considerate. I filtered for you.”

“Do you ever get tired?” Matthew scratched the top of his head. “You’re always so energetic.”

“My dad asks the same question. He’s even tried to deprive me of blood, wondering if that would ‘fix’ things.” Cole shrugged even though there was a bit of sadness in his eyes. “I say I can be calm and composed when I’m dead.”

I’d always wondered why Cole never talked about his parents. The few brief times that he had, it was short and sweet. This was confirmation of what I’d guessed all along.

“Alright, here it is.” Audrey came back into the room and waved the photo. She hurried over and held up the picture for Rage, Cole, and me to see.

It was an older photo, but Bloodshed was clearly in the background. It hadn’t changed in all these years. Like Audrey mentioned, there was a blanket underneath them with Matthew and her smiling wide. Right in the corner was a person that hadn’t meant to be included though. She was just barely in the shot. As I looked closer, my heart began to race.

No, it can’t be. It just can’t be my mother.

Chapter Seventeen

My whole world rattled. The Liz that was Audrey's best friend was my mother.

"Holy shit." Cole's voice filled with disbelief. "That looks just like your mom."

Rage's hand rested on my back.

"Because it's her." My mind flashed back to the wedding picture that hung in their room. They had been true mates too and performed their ceremony immediately. She didn't look much older than she did in this photo.

"Wait … You said her last name wasn't Cromwell." Matthew's brow creased, and he scratched his chin.

"It's not." I couldn't believe she would've done this. No wonder she was upset when she found out that I would be attending Bloodshed.

"I'm sure there is a reasonable explanation." Audrey tucked the picture behind her.

Like that was going to help anything. "I need to call her."

"Are you sure?" Rage's tender voice lessened the hysteria that threatened my mind. "Do you want to go for a walk?"

Not only had my mother ruined our Christmas, but her lies impacted my engagement. "No, I need to call her now." It probably wasn't a great idea, but this was something that I had to get off my chest. I'd always tried to protect them from what lay inside me, and if this wasn't betrayal, I would never know what it was. I headed to the door already, pulling my cell phone from my pocket.

Cole reached over and tapped my shoulder, "You know I'm one for not thinking things through, but …"

"Look, it may not be the best decision." I could be a big enough person to admit that. "But I feel like I can't breathe. I have to talk to her."

"Do you want me to go with you?" Rage didn't press but closed the distance between us. "I'll be quiet."

"Honey, please let him." Audrey must have seen my pending refusal.

"Okay, but I want to go outside." I didn't want everyone to hear what was said.

"Alright." He didn't bother reaching for my hand but just stayed close behind me as I made my way out the front door.

My hands shook as I dialed their number. It rang twice before mom picked up. "Merry Christmas, Raven."

I couldn't even pretend at this point. The cold air whipped around

my body and I held my arms close to my body. “You went to Bloodshed.”

“What?” Mom’s voice was an octave higher than normal.

“It wasn’t a question.” I’d never felt so vulnerable in my entire life. “Why did you lie to me?”

There were muffled noises, and I could tell she was beginning to pace. It was one of her ticks. “How did you find out?”

“Are you serious?” That was the first thing out of her mouth. “You lied to me.”

“I never meant to.” She sighed and put me on speaker. “I was just trying to protect you.”

“No, we were,” Dad’s voice interjected. “it was a decision both of us made.”

It was like the breath was knocked out of me. “You too?” Wasn’t it bad enough that one parent had done this? Now I’d learned both of them were involved?

“There’s a lot you don’t know and wouldn’t understand.” Dad cleared his throat.

“Why don’t you try me?” They still thought of me as their little girl. “Maybe you’d be surprised.”

“I had to leave.” Mom’s voice broke.

“Why?” None of this was making sense to me anymore.

There was only silence on the other end.

“Did you enchant the necklace too?” I already knew the answer, but I had to hear them say it.

“We were just trying to protect you.” It was like mom was on repeat.

“How about you tell me what you’re protecting me from?” When I thought it couldn’t get worse, it did.

“The Academy isn’t always what it seems,” Dad said cryptically.

“Did you go there too?” I hadn’t even considered that a possibility until now.

“That’s a complicated answer.”

“It’s either yes or no.” At this point, I already knew the answer.

“Yes, I was a year behind your mother.” His voice usually calmed me, but now it felt like nails on a chalkboard.

“So you both lied to me.” It hurt so much, and they weren’t even trying to answer me. Tears filled my eyes as I struggled to breathe. “How could you?”

“This is a long and complicated story.” Mom sobbed lightly and took in a shaky breath. “But it’s important for me to understand how you know about it.”

Rage placed a hand on my shoulder. Knowing he was there made me stronger, somehow. “You were Rage’s mom’s best friend.” I

shouldn't have said it, but it was a moment of weakness.

"Audrey is his mother?" The surprise in her voice was clear. "I didn't even put the two together."

"So she would lie to me as well?" I had thought this conversation would provide peace, but with my parents acting so cryptically, it only made things worse.

"That's not fair, Raven." Dad, as always, was taking mom's side. *No, wait; their side*.

"How is it not?" I'd never felt so angry before. The two people who were supposed to protect me had lied to me from the very beginning. "I need to know the truth."

"It wasn't something we wanted to do, but we need to protect you." Mom's voice cracked, and then she let out a long sigh. "Why don't you come up here, and we can talk?"

"So you can lie your way out of it?" At this point, how could I have trusted anything they said. Their true colors had finally shown.

"Now listen here." Dad's voice raised. "You can't talk to us this way. We deserve a little respect, especially your mother. After everything she sacrificed for you."

They lied to me and then tried to make it out as if they were the victims. Who the hell were these people? My whole childhood shattered with a phone call.

Rage took the phone from my hand and took a few steps away. His voice was low and raspy. "And you can't talk to her that way either."

At least I had one person that I could count on to always be in my corner. Even though it was comforting, it didn't heal the void inside me. He walked far enough away that I couldn't make out the words on the other end.

"No, she needs time." Rage's jaw clenched as he listened to more words. "If you won't tell her the truth, then there isn't a need to do that. It'll only cause her more pain."

After a few seconds, Rage sighed. "I'm trying to protect her too and trying to be respectful since you're her parents. At the end of the day, she's the only thing that matters to me. Give her time." He lowered the phone and clicked the red button, ending the call.

"I don't understand." Those three words summed up everything. They may seem simple, but it was so much more than that. They represented all my hurt. Why would my parents lie to me? How could they withhold the truth? They both attended Bloodshed, and they had never mentioned it. What the hell are they protecting me from? Why would she have given me that necklace and purposely cause me to be out of sync with my wolf? I mean, I was raised believing that a woman could never be an alpha, and clearly she knew otherwise.

"Me neither." He grabbed my waist and pulled me into his strong,

loving arms. His woodsy scent comforted me. He was my home. “But I don’t think they meant to hurt you.”

“Sometimes it doesn’t make a difference.” They must have thought I was weak if they weren’t willing to tell me their reason.

Rage’s fingertips caressed my cheek wiping away the tears that I shed. “I love you and I’m in your corner. Always.”

Even though I didn’t need his declaration, it soothed the pain ever so subtly. “I know, and I love you too.”

The front door opened, and Cole came barreling out. When his gaze landed on my face, he froze. “I’m going to kick their asses.”

I would have laughed if I had one ounce of doubt that he’d do it. “No, they aren’t worth it.”

“Like hell they aren’t.” This was the cold, calculative side of Cole that everyone feared. He pulled the keys from his back pocket. “Anyone that hurts my pack is worth it.”

Pack.

The word resonated deep inside me. Maybe that’s why I hadn’t felt like a rogue wolf. Between Rage and my friends, even though not an official pack, we did tend to work that way.

“It pains me to say this because that’s my natural inclination as well, but those are Raven’s parents.” Rage dropped his hand from my cheek and took my hand. “Even if she’s hurting now, doing something to them would hurt her worse.”

“Damnit.” Cole narrowed his eyes at Rage. “Why you gotta make sense? I just wanna kick their asses.”

Honestly, I wouldn’t have minded kicking their asses too, but it wouldn’t have accomplished anything. “I just want to know why.”

“Maybe when everything settles, they will tell you.” Rage squeezed my hand comfortably.

“Yeah, right.” Cole wrinkled his nose. “This is the kinda shit my parents do. When they’ve been lying for that long, there is a reason. Besides, they wouldn’t have kept their mouths shut for nineteen years just to have diarrhea of the mouth all of a sudden.”

“You’re so eloquent with words.” Cole was blunt, which was one reason so many people were afraid of him. He’d tell you what he thought even if you didn’t want to hear it. To me, that made him an invaluable friend.

“Why do you think I talk so much?” He patted himself on the chest and smiled.

“Because you like the sound of your voice.” Rage reached over and pushed him in the chest.

“I’ve gotten that same feedback from many people.” Cole’s cold demeanor disappeared as if he could sense that he was cheering me up. “I’ve been told many times that I had a voice made for radio.”

“For real?” Cole was many things, don’t get me wrong. I would have thought that people would say he should have been a model before telling him to be on the radio.

“That doesn’t even count.” Rage chuckled and shook his head. “A girl told you that your voice was nice. You’re the one who said that you had a radio voice.”

“But she didn’t contradict me.” He pointed his finger in Rage’s direction and lifted his chin. “And that meant she agreed.”

“Or that you were insane.” Rage reached his hand out and pushed Cole’s fingers down. “She might have been afraid you’d go psycho on her.”

“I only go crazy on those that deserve it.” Cole stepped back and lifted his hands. “Boom. You can’t deny that.”

“Not in a million years.” Even though I wasn’t my normal self, my near hysteria had calmed, thanks to my mate and close friend. I let go of Rage’s hand and made my way to Cole, wrapping him in a huge hug. “I love you.” His cotton candy scent filled my nose as I took in a deep breath.

“Oh, man.” He responded, pulling me in tight. “You’re going to make me cry. I love you too.” As he pulled back, he sniffed. “How does it feel to know that the first time your brand new fiancée said I love you, it was to me?”

“Really, Raven?” Rage winked at me even though his shoulders sagged. “Now I’m never going to hear the end of it.”

The front door opened, and Audrey stuck her head out. Worry lined her face. “Are you guys okay?”

The question was addressed to everyone but intended for me. “Yeah, we’re good.”

“Okay, we were all worried. Just wanted to check in.” Audrey smiled and rubbed her arms from the chill in the air. “Let me know if you need anything.” She turned around and shut the door.

“I’m not thrilled about going back in there.” Rage’s family had been nice and welcoming to me the whole time. I hated to be this way, but I didn’t want to go back inside to deal with the awkward looks. They had begun to feel like family, but we were all still getting comfortable with one another.

“Then let’s go get our things and head back to school.” Rage began making his way toward the door.

“No, I don’t want to cut time with your family short.” I shouldn’t have said anything.

“We’ve been here about a week, and we’ve spent Christmas morning with them. They’re fine.” He turned me around to face him and placed both hands on my arms. “You’re the most important person to me, so as long as I’m with you, I’m good.” He leaned over

and kissed my forehead. “Let’s go tell them goodbye and pack up.”

“I’m down for that.” Cole saluted us and grinned. “I’m tired of behaving.”

“Now, that might make me want to stay.” Rage dropped his hands and rubbed his eyes. “I’m not sure if I can take Cole when we first get back. All his pent-up shenanigans.”

“Well, take this for consideration.” Cole threw his arm around Rage’s shoulders. “The longer we stay, the more I’ll have to get out of my system.”

“Dear God.” I couldn’t help but tease him. “Then let’s leave right this second.”

AS WE CAME down the stairs with our luggage, I couldn’t help feeling bad for us leaving earlier than planned. Rage had assured me it was okay, so I didn’t make a fuss about staying. Honestly, I wanted to get back to my dorm and have time to think.

“I hate that you guys are going, but we understand.” Audrey wrapped her arms around Rage and kissed his cheek. “You better call us when you get there.”

“Son, don’t you think you should go say goodbye to the pack?” Matthew patted him on the shoulder. “I can call everyone to gather so you can tell them goodbye.”

“No, we need to get going.” Rage stood tall as if he was going to have to stand his ground.

“This will be your pack someday.” Matthew’s tone took an edge.

Rage hadn’t left my side ever since the phone call. I was doing better until we got back to the room I was staying in and hysteria took over once more. He packed our stuff for me as I tried to pull myself together. “Go on.”

“It’s not necessary.” Rage stood his ground. “You know that I wasn’t sure if I would want to follow in your footsteps, and this trip made my final decision.”

“If you aren’t alpha, then you’ll have to submit to someone else.” Matthew kept his eyes on his son.

“I’m sorry, but this pack isn’t for me.” Rage took my hand and wrapped an arm around Cole. “Cole said something earlier that cleared all my confusion. I have another pack that fits me better.”

A couple of months ago, Rage had brought up his doubts about his father’s pack. Seeing how some of the members reacted to Cole, I understood where he was coming from. Although I hadn’t known he came to a decision, at the same time, I wasn’t surprised.

“Well, alright then.” Matthew let out a huff and pulled his son in for a hug. “I hate that you came to that choice, but you must follow

your own path."

"So does that mean, I have a chance now?" Stone's eyes came alive more than I'd seen the entire trip.

"Yeah, just as long as you're stronger than everyone else." Matthew laughed and patted his shoulder.

"Thank you both for having me." They didn't have a choice when it came down to it since I was their son's mate, but they had made an effort to make me feel like part of their family.

"Dear, you're a part of us now." Audrey gave me a hug. "I'm finally getting the daughter I had always wanted."

"Thank you." I didn't know what more to say.

"Call us if you need anything." Matthew gave me a side hug. "I can't wait to see you when you return."

"And me too, right?" Cole hollered as he came down the stairs.

"Sure." Matthew chuckled and stepped out of the way.

"Uh … bye, sis?" Stone shrugged and didn't close the distance between us.

"Bye."

"Alright, we'll see you on the flip side." Cole opened the door and sauntered out. "Thanks for having me."

Rage followed after him, loading our things into the Audi's trunk.

"Hey, Raven," Audrey called after me.

"Yeah?"

"Look, I don't know what happened with your mother." A small frown tugged at the corners of her mouth. "But I do know she was a good person. She began acting distant right before her disappearance, but I could never get her to tell me why. All I'm trying to say is she was a good person, and I doubt that's changed. She must have her reasons."

This was the exact conversation I didn't want to have and why we were leaving. "That's the thing. I don't know what her reasons were either, and she kept me in the dark. Even now, both she and my dad won't tell me."

"Just remember, sometimes people do hurtful things trying to protect those they love the most." She bit her bottom lip and sighed. "You guys have a safe trip back. When you two start planning the wedding, let us know."

"We will. And Merry Christmas." It was surreal that this day was not only the best day of my life, but it was also the worst. I didn't know what the hell to do.

Chapter Eighteen

It was the second week in January, and our classes were set to start back up the next day. It was strange that I hadn't heard from Jess the whole break. Even when I had tried calling her to tell her the good news, there was no answer. I'd hoped that she worked through whatever had been plaguing her.

The guys went to the pizza parlor in town, but I had told them I wasn't up for it. Rage tried to stay with me, but I told him that I needed to be here by myself. Jess had to be coming back tonight, and I wanted to talk to her badly.

He had known that I'd been worried about her, especially after I tried calling and texting her multiple times. Even though she was in her Fae world, she had a phone that I could reach her through. It was some kind of fae converter. I wasn't even sure what that meant.

The clock was ticking, and I began wondering if she was even coming back. I mean she'd have let us know, wouldn't she. The clock hit ten, and I figured it was time to give up. The last few weeks, I hadn't been sleeping well. Between learning that my parents had lied to me and Jess not answering my calls, my mind kept running in circles. I hated that it overshadowed the happiness of my engagement. Hell, I wasn't even sure if my parents knew about it.

Right when I stood and stepped into the hallway leading to my room, the door handle jiggled before opening. Jess stepped into the doorway and halted when her eyes landed on me.

"Were you trying to sneak in?" This had to end tonight. I couldn't lose my best friend too.

"No." She shook her head quickly from side to side and then sighed.

"Do you think I'm stupid?" Between her and my parents, maybe I should have taken note that apparently, I came off like a moron.

"Yes." Then she dropped her luggage and raised her hands in the air. "I mean, no." She took a deep breath. "Yes, I was lying, and no you aren't stupid."

I had to keep my cool. I couldn't deflect my anger at my parents onto her. "Why didn't you ever call or at least text me back?" She was even dressed in black, which wasn't like her.

"I forgot my phone."

"That's bullshit." I could see her bright pink phone in the back pocket of her dark jeans for crying out loud. "You texted Cole, and your phone is right there."

"How did you know that?" She pulled the phone out of her pocket.

“I mean, that I texted Cole.”

“Because I was with him all break.” It seemed as if there were miles between us at this moment. “Why were you lying to me?”

“Look, Raven, I don’t want to talk about it.” Jess grabbed the handle on her rolling luggage and entered the room, closing the door behind her.

“No, you don’t get to make that decision anymore.” There had to be something I was doing to push these people away. I had to know what I’d done.

“Excuse me?” Jess spun on her heels and placed her hands on her hips. “You don’t get to make fucking decisions for me.”

She was right, but dammit. “No, but I need my best friend back.” The truth of the words shocked me. My eyes stung, threatening me with tears.

“Oh, Raven.” Jess pinched the bridge of her nose and sat on the couch. “I’m sorry. I need you too.”

Okay, she was willing to talk now. “Then why are you pushing me away? Did I do something?”

“Of course not.” She leaned over, placing her arms on the top of her legs. “It’s complicated.”

“Well, at the moment, complicated seems to be my thing.” So was not understanding, but we wouldn’t go there right now.

“I’m scared.” Her bright violet eyes looked up at me.

“Why? Did someone threaten you?” If someone was trying to hurt her, they’d have another thing coming.

“What? No.” She threw her hands in the air and groaned. “No, I’m afraid to tell you something.”

That knocked the breath out of me. “Am I that judgmental?” I mean, I knew I had my faults, but I didn’t think I was that bad.

“God.” She covered her face with her hands. “I keep screwing this up. No, you aren’t judgmental, but I’m afraid you might be over this.”

“Just try me.” I needed our relationship back to normal. “You know I’m always in your corner. I mean, you’re already acting like we aren’t friends. How much worse could it be if you actually told me?”

“You’re right.” She dropped her hands, placing them in her lap, and straightened her shoulders. “I’ve fallen for somebody.”

“Really?” That didn’t make any sense why she would be worried. “That’s great. Does he go here?”

“He does.”

“Have I met him?” At this point, I felt like a detective.

“Yup.” She bit her bottom lip and stared at the ground.

“Well, who is it?” I tried hiding my frustration. At least I was getting somewhere with her now.

She cringed as she said, “Cole.”

I must have heard her wrong. There was no way she could have said his name. He was a vampire. “Cole?”

“Yes, Cole.” Her head slowly raised as her eyes met mine.

Now it made sense. All the weird tension between them, how she stopped wanting to hang out with us, and even why she didn’t want to tell me. I had to remain calm. “But you’re different races.”

“You don’t think I know that.” She raised her voice at me, something she’d never done before. “I didn’t mean for it to happen. It’s not like I asked for this. It’s just we have so much in common and he’s … well … you know.”

“How does he feel?” It hurt that he hadn’t talked to me either. Not only were my parents keeping secrets from me, but two of my best friends were as well.

“The same, but he’s better at pretending. With his parents being so uninvolved in his life, he’s always had to put on an act. He loves you too much to put you into an awkward situation.” She leaned back, her ash blonde hair contrasting against her black shirt. “That’s why we decided to take a break.”

The image of the dead half-breed the guys and I had to clean up that night flashed in my head. “I just don’t want something bad to happen to you guys, especially if you got serious.”

“Yes, I know.” She huffed and tapped her foot on the ground. “Half-breeds are horrible and others would judge our interracial relationship. I’m well aware. I sit in the same class as you.”

It bothered me because if the half-breeds weren’t an issue, Cole and she made an amazing couple. They had similar personalities, but Jess was more level headed most of the time. “I’m sorry.” I wished I could encourage them. I mean, it would have been nice to have another couple in the group.

Those words deflated Jess. Her whole body sagged as if the load she was bearing was too much. “Me too.”

“Thank you for telling me.” Unlike my parents, she had confided in me. “I wish I could do something to make it better.”

“I’m such an idiot.” Jess gave me a sad smile. “I shouldn’t have been a chicken, and I should have told you. I’m sorry.”

For the first time in weeks, my friend was sitting in front of me. “Hey, you were dealing with a lot. There isn’t anything to apologize for.” I sat next to her on the couch and wrapped my arm around her, pulling her into a hug.

“Well, how was your Christmas?” As she pulled back, her eyes locked on my diamond. “Is that an engagement ring?”

“Maybe.” I couldn’t hide the smile in my voice. I finally had someone I could celebrate it with.

“Oh my God.” She grabbed my hand and lifted it closer to her face.

“I’m such an ass. That’s why you kept calling.”

“Well, that, and I wanted to check on you.” I didn’t want to make her feel any worse.

“Now give me all the details.” Her eyes brightened, and she leaned toward me, ready for the story.

“AND THAT’S YET another reason why half-breeds are such a menace.” Professor Shaw underlined unbalanced on the board. “Any type of interracial couple could result in a hybrid and should be frowned upon.”

I couldn’t help but glance at Jess as the teacher droned on and on about this subject. After the talk Jess and I had, it did appear odd that this class even existed. It seemed that the whole reason was to beat the subject into our brains—brainwashing. Why couldn’t this subject be a side note in another class?

Jess doodled in her spiral notebook, acting as if she was taking notes. Her long hair acted as a curtain.

Today, I couldn’t even pretend to concentrate on the lecture. I didn’t understand how two such great people couldn’t be together. How could it be so bad?

“Hey, let’s go.” Rage arched an eyebrow at me.

Crap. Class was over. I hadn’t been able to talk to him about everything last night since Jess and I talked until the wee hours of the morning. I stood and hurried out the door.

“Are you okay?” Rage asked as we strolled in the hall.

Jess was right on our heels, so I didn’t want to say anything, especially with other supernatural ears listening.

“Yeah. Just a little distracted.” That wasn’t a lie.

“That’s not a good thing to be here at Bloodshed.” Isadora appeared in front of me, her words just as sharp as her features. “So I take it you didn’t retain anything from this new, exciting class?”

“Sorry, just a lot happened over break, so I spaced out for a minute.” It felt like she was fishing for something. “It won’t happen again.”

“Make sure it doesn’t.” She nodded her head at Rage and passed by, entering the classroom.

“She always gives me the creeps.” Jess murmured when she caught up to me.

“Let’s just say I don’t like hanging around her.” Every time we crossed paths, either something bad had happened or was going to.

We made our way outside to find Cole and Damien standing in the courtyard. Damien leaned against the tree, the red in his hair standing out in the sun.

Cole's eyes glanced at our group and quickly settled on Jess. "What's up, my people?"

"Just another day of class." Rage rolled his eyes and stopped once we reached them. "I'd hate it if I didn't get to sit next to the prettiest girl in the world."

"Uh oh. What did you do?" Cole propped his hands on his hips and leaned forward. "Might as well get it all out."

"Did you just imply Raven was ugly?" Jess tilted her head and pursed her lips.

"What? No." Cole shook his head and winked at me. "Of course not."

"It did kind of sound that way." Damien smirked.

"Of course, now is when you decide to talk and join the conversation." Cole narrowed his eyes at him.

"I think what Rage said was sweet." I stood on my tiptoes and pressed a soft kiss to his lips.

"Oh, gag me." Nate sauntered over and snarled. "You're too hot for him."

The day just kept getting better.

"I disagree." I lifted my left hand and ran my fingers through his hair. My ring caught the sun and sparkled.

"Wait. Are you marrying him?" Nate scoffed and crossed his arms.

"Well, he is my true mate, so it would only make sense." The more I interacted with the ass, the more I disliked him.

"Such a waste," Nate grumbled.

"Yeah, you're a waste of good air so now why don't you run along." Cole's cold demeanor appeared in full force.

"Listen here, Bloodsucker." Nate took a step toward Cole and snarled. "If anyone wastes air, it's this little group of yours. You should be sticking to your kind."

"I do stick with my kind." Cole used his vampire speed and pushed Nate in the chest hard. "That's why I have my family right here around me."

"You're going to regret that." Nate reared back and threw a punch. Right before it was about to hit, Cole grabbed his hand and gripped it hard.

"Ow!" Nate cried as his bones began to pop.

"That's right. Cry like the little bitch you are." Cole chuckled as he released Nate's hand.

"Let me guess, you're going to say some version of you're going to regret that." Damien's bored voice intervened. "Why don't you cut the shit and leave us alone?"

"It is kind of strange how you obsess over us." Jess shrugged her shoulders.

“I promise it’s not …”

“Shush, Nate.” Jordan walked over with Madison following behind. “Leave them alone. You have somewhere else you’re supposed to be anyways.”

To say I was shocked when he didn’t argue would be an understatement.

“Fine.” He grumbled and glared back at Cole once more before he strode off.

“Hey, Raven.” Jordan smiled her fake smile and motioned toward her. “Can we have a second?”

“Oh, sure.” I was assuming this had something to do with The Elites. I glanced at Jess whose eyes were wide with surprise. “I’ll be right back.”

Jordan and I moved to the side. Madison started to make her way toward us.

“No, stay there.” Jordan pointed to some benches several yards away.

Madison’s mouth dropped open, and she stopped right in her tracks. “But …”

“It’ll only be a second.” Jordan grabbed my arm and hurried me over to the other side of the courtyard near the woods where no one was near. “We have another target tonight.”

“Target?” When she said it that way, it didn’t sound like we were helping anyone.

“Yeah, before she has time to implode.” Jordan’s annoyance was clear in her tone. “So, meet us at the skating rink so we can pick her up. It’s called Airline. It’ll be similar to the way Dave and Busters went down, but this girl is even younger. All we need to do is get her into the car so we can take her to the safe zone.”

“Will we get to go to the safe area this time?” Ever since that day, it bothered me that I had lied to that guy since they wouldn’t let me follow them. I had no clue where they took him.

“No, you are still proving yourself.” Jordan giggled and patted my arm. “If you don’t mess up, maybe you’ll get a higher position. We’ll meet you and Rage there tonight at six.”

“Okay.” Except this time, I wasn’t okay with being left behind. I was going to follow them. It was time to see the team we were supporting. We just couldn’t get caught.

Chapter Nineteen

Rage and I marched up to the entrance of the skating rink. The outside wasn't like any building near Clarksville. It was all brick but painted in Coca-Cola red with their standard emblem. Cole had to joke that he bet they didn't even serve Coke products there when he dropped us off several blocks away.

Tonight, we were going to find out the truth about the society or at least try. Even though we were technically forbidden, Rage and I told the rest of the pack about what we knew of the society and how we'd been helping them locate the hybrids.

Even though I wanted to rat out Jess and Cole to Damien, it wasn't my story to tell so I focused on the truth I wanted to know. Where was this secret location, and what happened to the hybrids there? Theoretically, I understood they took them somewhere safe, but I needed to see the Elite's definition of safe.

The others had been hurt that we hadn't told them right away, but what could Jess and Cole say. They had kept a secret from us just as much as we had with them. Both were protective measures, but I was beginning to see that it just created distance among our group.

Cole's car was parked far enough away for them not to notice but close enough that he could watch for when he needed to grab us.

"You ready for this?" Rage took my hand and squeezed.

"Yes." I'd told Rage earlier that I had a feeling something was off. He said there was only one way to find out and here we were. The fact that he trusted my gut spoke volumes.

Rage opened the door, and I walked in. The inside was typical of any skating rink. Neon colors appeared to be splashed everywhere, and the odor of feet hung in the air. Times like these, I wished that my nose wasn't so sensitive.

The front desk had a glass window, and a young kid stood there working the register. He had the standard human boy haircut. So long that it covered his eyes and he had to flip his hair back every few minutes so he could see. "Two for skating?"

There was no way in hell I was going to put my feet into something so smelly. "Uh, no. We're here to play the arcade games."

These were the times when I missed being part of a pack. It would have been nice if Rage and I could have spoken telepathically while in human form.

"Yeah. Okay. Whatever." He shrugged and rang something up on the cash register. "It'll be ten for you two."

"Here you go." Rage pulled out his wallet and handed over the

money.

“Alright, you guys can go on in.” The kid motioned to the door that was partially ajar, loud music was blaring from within.

My entire life, I had purposely avoided these types of places. It was so rough on my senses. Why would a supernatural purposely put themselves in here? She must not be a shifter.

As we stepped through the door, Jordan hollered at us. Her fake smile was solidly pasted in place. Her long black hair was in a ponytail, which bobbed with every step that she took. She looked awkward in her jeans and a light sweater. Every time I saw her, she wore designer things, so this was a new look.

I forced a smile on my face. I guessed it was time to play my part. “Hey.”

“It took you long enough.” Her eyes glowed even brighter with the blacklight on.

“We’re here, so get on with it.” Rage’s voice was laced with his alpha wolf. “Otherwise, we’ll get going.”

“And you wonder why you haven’t earned a better place in our group.” Jordan rolled her eyes but continued the act of being friendly.

“Maybe we’d feel better about it all if we knew more.” The superior tone she was using with us grated on my nerves.

“That’s not my call.” Jordan turned and scanned the area. “Do you smell her?”

I’d be damned if I admitted defeat to the likes of Jordan. She was testing us. I focused past the smell of feet and sweat, looking for something to hold on to. There was a sweetness in the air but also a hint of salt. No, it couldn’t be. “She’s half mermaid and vampire?”

“Very good.” Jordan raised an eyebrow. “I thought the mermaid would throw you off.”

“Is there a point to this?” Rage’s body tensed as his eyes landed on our target.

Mermaids were rare for our world. They kept to the sea and isolated themselves more so than the fae. Anyway, for us to not only find a mermaid but a vampire-mermaid hybrid was mind-blowing.

My eyes followed Rage’s and landed on the girl. Her hair was gorgeous like all the pictures I’d ever seen of mermaids. It was thick, long, and wavy, and even though it looked black, purple undertones stood out. She appeared to be around thirteen which at least made a little sense for her to be hanging out here. She looked like a porcelain doll, her beauty was breathtaking.

“Alright, just like last time, we’ve got to get her to leave with us.” Jordan glanced at each one of us like she was ready for an argument.

I would’ve given her one, too, if we didn’t have Cole, Jess, and Damien waiting on us.

The girl must have sensed us. Her ethereal blue eyes glowed as they met my own.

I forced a smile even though my stomach was twisted into knots. It was uncanny how supernaturals could sense one another even when they weren't the same race.

"Once again, they pay attention to you." Jordan huffed and turned toward the arcade. "I'm a freaking vampire. You'd think she'd notice me first."

"You do realize this isn't a popularity contest, right?" The corner of Rage's mouth turned upward, but he maintained an indifferent expression.

"Oh, shut up." Jordan stomped off and headed straight to the arcade and dinging of games.

"How is it possible that I get on her nerves when I didn't do anything?" I wasn't upset, per se, but damn. There was no winning.

"I call it talent." Rage grabbed my hand and chuckled. "I wish I had the same skill for people like her."

"No, your talent is with Nate." Rage rubbed him the wrong way just by breathing. So I guess it was very similar.

"Damn right." He winked at me and tugged gently on my arm so that we followed after the sulking vampire.

Jordan leaned against the wall, watching some teenage boys with pimples play some shooting game. She positioned herself to keep an eye on the girl and yet look like she was watching the guys.

I had to give her props for her sleuthiness.

For some reason, I didn't feel as if we should join her. So I headed to the back of the arcade, close to where the girl and her friends were hanging. The entire way, I could feel her eyes drilling into me.

"Do you mind getting the tokens for the games?" Rage was hot and intimidating. I needed him to separate from me for a few minutes to see if the girl would approach me.

"Now?" His brows furrowed together, but he nodded. "Sure. You going to stay here?"

"Yeah." I headed over to the grab a stuffed animal game and looked at the toys inside. There were a goofy looking squirrel and a few odd things that I couldn't quite tell what they were.

"Okay." He turned and headed to the middle of the arcade area where the token machines were.

In just a few moments, her scent grew stronger. I didn't want to turn around and spook her though.

"Hey?" Her voice was sweet like a melody.

When I pivoted to face her, her beauty hit me hard. Mermaids were also known as sirens in some lore. They were devastatingly beautiful and very alluring. The fact that she was that and a vampire

made her a sight to behold. “Hi.” I kept my voice calm and gave her a small smile.

“You seem familiar to me.” She scanned me over as if she was trying to unbury a memory. “But I can’t remember how.”

“Angel, are you coming?” One of her friends waved her hand and pointed over to a room that all of them were entering. There was a huge birthday cake on one of the tables.

“Uh … yeah. I’ll be there in a minute.” She picked at her nails and sighed.

“Raven, where did you go?” Jordan’s snotty voice pierced my ears.

She couldn’t just leave me alone to have a chat with this girl. She had to control the situation.

“I wanted to check out the machine.” Oh and get away from you and Rage. However, that wasn’t going to go over well if I said it out loud.

“Oh, hi.” Jordan held her hand out toward the girl. “I’m Jordan.”

Dear lord, is she trying to shake hands with a twelve-year-old? I smacked her hand away. “And I’m Raven.”

“What the …” Jordan started off, but I didn’t let her finish.

“Are you here for a friend’s birthday?” I pointed to the kids that were now all in the room eating pizza.

“Kind of …” She glanced at them and appeared dazed. “I don’t feel like I fit in though.”

“Tell me about it.” Jordan reached out to touch her arm, but Angel jerked back.

Great, now she was scaring her. “It’s like there is something inside you that you can’t control.” I remembered those days all too well.

“Exactly.” The little girl looked at me and nodded. “Like there is something that shouldn’t be there.”

“But they are supposed to be there.” Gosh, this could have easily been me when I was that age. At least I knew I was a wolf shifter and could identify it. “Where are your parents?”

“Oh, I’m a foster kid.” Her shoulders slumped, and she glanced at the ground. “I don’t even have a clue who they were.”

My heart hurt for her. “What if I could tell you things that might help you?”

“Yes, please.” She was hanging on to my every word, and her face lit with hope.

“Not here though.” Jordan narrowed her eyes at me and pointed to the door. “We need to go somewhere else for that conversation.”

Great, here we go scaring another…

“Hey, babe.” Rage held one of the tokens up. “You want to play?”

“No, we were leaving.” Jordan grabbed the token out of his hands and put it in her jean pockets.

“Are you okay leaving?” At least this time, I knew better than to say, “With me.”

“Actually, yes. If you can give me answers.” She started skating toward the front. “Just let me change into my shoes.”

When she was out of supernatural earshot, I couldn’t keep my mouth shut any longer. “You can’t just take an underage girl. Her foster parents …”

“Don’t give a damn about her.” Jordan stepped into my bubble. “Listen here, pup. Don’t you think I did my research before coming here? Her foster parents ignore her. They are only in it for the check, so don’t give me any shit. They probably won’t report her missing for days.”

“You might have researched, but she’s a young girl.” I couldn’t understand why these kids were such a threat. Each one seemed to be good and not crazed or even a threat to themselves.

Rage placed a hand on my back and gazed at me. “Listen, you know they’re dangerous. We’re here to help them. It’s not like her foster parents can.”

He was right. If I acted out anymore, we were going to lose our advantage. We needed Jordan to know we were on The Elites’ side. “You’re right. I’m sorry. She’s just so young.”

“And even luckier that we found her before she became a threat to herself.” Jordan smiled and flipped her hair over her shoulder. “Rage gets it.”

I had to bite my tongue. “He keeps me grounded.” That was a true statement, but I didn’t like the googly eyes she was giving my man.

“Come on.” Jordan strode in the direction of Angel.

Angel was putting her last shoe on when we reached her. “I’m ready.”

“Great, I’m so excited that we can help you.” Jordan’s smile was basically threatening.

“Uh … yeah.” The girl took a step back.

The four of us made our way out of the building when the same dark vehicle the night of Dave and Busters pulled up in front with Nate’s smirking face looking right at us.

“Here’s our ride.” Jordan opened the backseat driver’s side door just like last time and waved her hand to the vehicle. “After you Angel.”

The urge to reach out and grab the girl overcame me. It took every ounce of my willpower to not jump in the car.

Angel climbed into the car and looked back at me. “Are you coming?”

“Not right now.” I didn’t want to lie to her. “But I’m sure I’ll see you soon.”

“Scooch, please.” Jordan’s tone had an edge. “I’m sitting back here with you.”

“Oh, okay.” The girl moved to the other side, and Jordan jumped in, slamming the door behind her.

Without another word, the car drove off.

“Where are they?” If Cole didn’t hurry, we were going to lose sight of them.

“He’s on his way.” Rage pointed at headlights. “I texted him when I saw her approach you while I was getting the card.”

A loud screech filled the air as the red Audi squealed into the parking lot. It raced toward us and then slammed to a stop.

Dear Lord. We were going to get killed before we even tried to follow them.

Cole stuck his head out the window. “Get your asses in the car.” A huge grin filled his face.

He was enjoying this way too much. I rushed to the driver’s side passenger door and opened the car, jumping into the center seat right next to Jess.

“Go.” Rage jumped in beside me and slammed the door. “We’re going to lose them.”

“Like hell we will.” Cole slammed the car into drive and peeled out of the parking lot. Car lights shone in our eyes as brakes squealing filled the air. A car horn blared as we skidded to the left and pulled out in front of a large eighteen-wheeler.

“We’re going to die,” Jess screamed beside me, covering her eyes with her hands.

“If I waited for an invitation, we’d still be sitting in the parking lot,” Cole screamed as he accelerated the car.

“I hate to agree with him, but he’s right.” Damien groaned in the front seat as he placed his hand on the glove box. “There they are. Stop driving like a maniac.”

“Uh, yeah.” Cole turned his head focusing on Damien, and not the road. “It’s like you think I don’t know how to not stand out.”

Red brake lights were right in front of us and we were maintaining the same speed. “Brake.”

The car jerked us forward as Cole slammed on the brakes. He turned the car so we poked a little outside of the road, stopping us from ramming into the vehicle in front of us.

“Dammit, Cole.” Rage roared in the backseat. “Get your head on straight.”

Soon, we were moving again, and Cole placed his hands on the steering wheel. “Alright, let’s do this.”

Surprisingly, Cole began driving like a normal person. The car was at least ten cars ahead of us, and Cole did well keeping up without

doing any more outlandish stunts. It helped when Nate turned onto a road that led us north of New Orleans. We were able to get out of the city traffic.

As traffic began to reduce, Cole made sure to stay at least four cars behind. Soon Nate turned into a gas station and slowed at the front.

"Shit, this isn't good." Damien groaned. "They're going to see us."

"Not if I can help it." Jess closed her eyes and murmured words under her breath. Shimmers appeared around the outside of the car. "There, we should be hidden to them. I just hope they don't take long."

Damn, Jess hardly ever used her magic, but when she did, it was freaking amazing. It made me wonder why she didn't use it more often.

"Just pull in a parking space, and we'll roll down our windows." Jess motioned to the one in the corner of the lot where the least amount of light hit.

"Yes, ma'am." He saluted her in the rearview mirror and followed her instructions.

Rage rolled down his window as the car became quiet.

Nate climbed out of the other car and began pumping gas.

"Why the hell didn't you get gas before picking us up?" Jordan smiled at Angel and then shut the door. "I mean you know there aren't supposed to be any extra stops."

"Give it a rest." Nate rolled his eyes at her and pointed inside. "Go get yourself a sugar-free coke or something, and stop bitchin'."

"This is a huge deal." Jordan checked her surroundings before she lowered her voice so that any humans couldn't hear. "We have to get her to the drop off point before she becomes suspicious. They can contain her there."

Contain her? What the hell were they talking about?

Somehow, Angel's eyes found mine. She startled and glanced at the two bickering idiots.

"Jess?" My voice was quiet, not wanting to alert Nate and Jordan to our presence. "The girl is looking straight at me."

"That's not possible." Jess huffed and scratched the back of her neck. "Only a mermaid could see through my spell."

"She's half mermaid." Of course, this girl would be the one exception this time around.

"What?" Jess dropped her hands in her lap. "Why didn't you tell me that?"

"Uh … Because I didn't realize it was a factor in your magic." I looked back at Angel and placed my finger to my lips.

"Do you think I want to risk me and my brother's cushy job?" Nate shook his head and laughed. "If you stop shouting and acting like a

bitch, we'll be fine."

"Just fill it up, fast. I'm going to go find a snack. I deserve it after having to deal with Raven." Jordan headed into the store, leaving Angel alone with Nate.

As Nate pressed the lever, the pump refused to start. He smacked the machine once like that was going to help.

The attendant inside must have pressed the intercom button. "This is a prepay pump."

"Of course it is." He growled deeply. "Damnit. I can't use my card." He marched into the building, leaving Angel alone.

"Get her to come over here." Damien glanced around. "If they get to wherever they're heading, there isn't a way we can help her."

He was right. We had to help her and now. I raised my finger, beckoning for her to come to us.

It shocked me when there was no hesitation from her. She glanced at the storefront and opened the car door slowly. She then shut it gently and ran to the car we were in.

Not hesitating, Rage opened the door for her to jump in.

"Hey." Nate sauntered out from the store just as Angel jumped into the backseat of the car. His eyes widened. "What the hell?"

"Go, Cole. Drive the craziest you can." Rage slammed the door shut, and Cole reversed, swinging out on the road.

"See, I knew you guys would come around eventually." Cole grinned as he shifted the car into drive and pressed hard on the accelerator.

"Don't get too cocky yet." Damien turned around so he was looking out the back window. "Because there's Nate now."

The dark vehicle was gaining on us.

"This isn't good." The first thing Nate was going to do was tell the society.

"Why did you come get me?" Angel's sweet voice shook. "I thought they were your friends."

"Oh, honey." I hadn't even thought about how she would feel. We were just trying to save her from wherever they were taking her. Just because she was a hybrid didn't mean she should be treated like a criminal. "It's a long story, but we're going to do everything we can to protect you."

"We're going to have to stop and fight him." Damien scanned the area. "Otherwise, the society is going to know what we did."

"So what are we going to do?" Jess giggled. "Offer him a bone and hope he takes it?"

"Why are you laughing?" There wasn't anything funny about this situation.

"Because when stress overwhelms me, I respond by laughing." Jess

shook her finger at me. “Don’t judge.”

“We all deal with things in our own way, so no judging here.” If that was her coping strategy, so be it.

Angel shifted so she was sitting on the floorboard in front of Jess.

“Well, I’m judging.” Cole glanced in the rearview mirror. “Just to set the record straight.”

“Are you not taking this seriously?” Rage’s forehead creased. “You’re talking shit in a bad situation.”

“You see, that’s the problem with you all.” There was a break in the trees to the left, and Cole took a sharp turn, heading straight for it. “We’re about to deal with the situation, so all is good.”

We all bounced as we hit uneven ground, and the black car followed right behind us.

Once we were hidden from the main road, Cole stopped and pointed to us. “Now it’s showtime.”

One thing was for sure, I hadn’t planned on our night ending like this.

Chapter Twenty

"What do I do?" Angel had started to shake uncontrollably, and she curled into a ball on the floorboard.

I hated that the night had come to this. "Stay here." I glanced at Jess and smiled. "Do you mind?"

Jess's shoulders sagged as she nodded. "Yeah, I'll keep her company, but if you need me, yell. Got it?"

"Nothing is going to happen to Raven." Rage opened the car door and climbed out. "I'll make sure of it."

"Then you better stay out of trouble too." If he thought I'd leave him in a bad situation, he had another think coming. "Or else, we'll go out together."

Damien and Cole got out of the car and rushed to the trunk.

"Jess is a good friend of mine." I wanted to reassure Angel before getting out. "She'll take care of you, okay?"

"Okay." Angel nodded and somehow melted further into the floorboard. "I trust you."

Those simple words hit me hard. I couldn't mess up. Not able to respond, I nodded my head before climbing out of the car.

"Raven?" Angel called out to me.

Crap, I didn't have time for this. "Yeah?"

"You're going to be safe, right?" Her voice shivered, and she wrapped her arms around me.

I didn't want to lie, but there was no other choice. "Of course."

"Why am I not surprised?" Nate clambered from the car and stared our group of four down. He focused his attention on me. "I'm not surprised. I told Jordan and the others that it wasn't wise to bring you in, but for some reason, they were determined to have you."

"Maybe they needed style for once." Cole chuckled and leaned back on his feet.

"Shut up, bloodsucker." Nate clenched his hands and snarled in his direction. "I wasn't talking to you."

"Well, now you are, so problem solved." Cole was tense, but to someone who didn't know him, he managed to come off carefree and unaffected. "So why are you complaining?"

"You may even be worse than Jordan," Nate growled as he took a few steps closer.

"Awe, now you're complimenting me." Cole smiled and waved the comment off. "You shouldn't have."

"How can you stand him?" Nate cringed and wrinkled his nose. "You're so hot. You have such great potential too. You're blowing it

on these idiots and a supposed true mate that's weak as fuck."

"Watch what you say." Rage's voice was low and raspy. "I may have to hurt you."

"Oh, no ..." Nate placed both hands to his cheeks pretending to be scared.

"Are you stalling for others to arrive?" I hoped to God he hadn't called anyone, but I could play his ego to find out. "I mean, I'd be scared too if I were you."

"Ha. Are you serious right now?" Nate laughed and took a few more steps toward us. "I don't need anyone to help with the likes of you. I can take all six of you out with my hands tied behind my back."

"That's a pretty lofty goal." Great, now I was starting to sound like Cole. "I mean, you think you alone can take two wolf shifters, a vampire, and a bear?"

"See, that's the only way you think you can win." Nate grinned as he pulled a wolf necklace from his pocket. He placed it around his neck, and his eyes glowed. "I have back up for situations just like this."

"What the hell?" Damien's breathing increased. "Is that spelled?"

"Of course it is." Nate was now only a few feet away from us. "It's more than I need, especially for you weaklings."

There was no telling what the necklace allowed him to do. "Where were you taking her?"

"It doesn't matter. She's a hybrid and needs to be contained." Nate's green eyes stared me down. "You've been in the same classes as me."

I refused to cower. "Okay, but why take her out of New Orleans. I would think somewhere close by where she can get help would be better."

"See, Jordan kept telling them that you weren't the right one for this job." Nate glanced at each one of us and then the car. "Your whole group is a mismatch of races. But she told me that they kept saying you were the one. Something about a dream. I don't know and frankly don't care either."

"You don't have to do this." That necklace made him unpredictable, and I'd admit I was scared.

"Oh, Ravey. He's going to tell you yes he does." Cole hit Damien's arm. "Isn't he?"

"He's got to prove his dick is bigger than mine." Rage shrugged and lifted his head. "Unfortunately, he's already lost that one."

"Bring it on." The last word turned into a howl as Nate shifted into his wolf. His body cracked and began changing.

"Stay out of the way." Rage leaned over and kissed my lips quickly before he allowed the shift to overtake him.

“If you don’t want Rage to get hurt, you need to get out of range now.” Damien grabbed my arm, pulling me back a few steps and out of the way.

“No, I need to fight beside him.” There was no way that I wouldn’t be next to him.

“You’ll distract him, Raven.” Damien raised his voice, which was something he never did.

It was enough to bring me back into the moment instead of panicking. “You’re right.”

“Stay here.” Damien turned and headed back to the fight.

Both of the guys were now in their wolf form. However, Nate’s dark gray wolf was twice the size of Rage’s pure white one.

Taking full advantage of the situation, Nate struck first. He went straight for Rage’s neck.

Thankfully, Rage lowered himself to the ground, making Nate miss his target.

Nate tumbled over and landed straight on his back. A loud howl filled the air as he scrambled back on his feet. He snarled, showing all of his teeth.

Rage lowered his wolf to the ground, ready to strike. As he charged, he jumped and targeted the gray wolf's neck. However, when he jumped, Nate stood on his back legs, making Rage miss his neck. Nate was able to bite him and throw him, making him hit a tree and slide down apparently unconscious.

“Shit, Rage isn’t used to being smaller. He doesn’t know how to fight.” Damien growled as the shift overtook him as well.

“Stay back, Damien. It’s my turn.” Cole used his vampire speed to smack the wolf’s side as he advanced on Rage. Nate flew across the clearing.

There was no way I could just stand here and watch this. “I’m going in.”

“No, you’re not,” Damien growled as his body began to contort. “Cole and I have this.”

I wanted to scream. I got that I was the least trained out of all of them, but it was like Nate was on steroids times four. I didn’t want them to be distracted by me.

The wolf howled as it got back on its feet and stared down Cole. It pawed at the ground as if daring Cole to attack.

“You’re going to regret that, mutt.” Cole flashed again as he sped toward him, but the wolf lowered itself to the ground and tore into the vampire’s leg.

“Ow.” Cole cried as he tugged on his leg trying to yank it free, but the wolf clung on tight.

A loud grizzly roar echoed in the area. Damien raced toward the

wolf as he released Cole's leg from his mouth.

Cole tried standing but fell to the ground. There was too much damage to his leg.

Within seconds, the wolf tore into the vampire's neck. Blood was spilling everywhere. Cole tried to beat him off, but his strength began to fade.

As Damien got closer, he stood on his hind legs.

It was strange because I'd never seen a wolf the same height as a bear before.

Not wasting a second, Nate ran toward Damien. The wolf went straight for his neck as well, but Damien was strong enough to swat him down. Nate hit the ground hard.

Damien rushed over to Cole, smelling him. Even in his bear form, concern was evident throughout his body. He hovered over him, protecting him.

My stomach wanted to retch as Cole's sweet smell grew stronger. The more he bled, the sweeter it became.

Despite the blood, Cole tried to stand. "I'm fine." His voice was unrecognizable from the wound in this throat.

"No." Jess cried as she climbed out of the car. "Cole."

A cheesy wolf grin filled Nate's face. His eyes were set on my best friend. He was in the middle of the circle where he could easily attack Cole or Jess.

At this point, I didn't give a damn if the guys got mad at me or not. I began the shift into my wolf. I couldn't let one of my favorite people die. My clothes tore as fur sprouted, and my bones broke and molded into my animal form.

The bear growled at me, not happy with what I'd done. However, at the moment, we had no other option.

Nate charged for my friend, and I pushed my legs to run as fast as they could. He was fucking unstoppable, because of that necklace. Wait … That was it. We needed to rip his necklace off. As I caught up to him, I could see the silver wolf's head dangle slightly from his chest.

We were only a few feet away from Jess at the moment. I had to get the necklace and now. I lunged right toward it, but he spun around and knocked me to the ground.

I hit the ground on my left side with a loud thud. Pain throbbed so hard that I had tunnel vision, but I had to push through it. If we wanted to make it out of this alive, I had to stay strong.

The longer I laid on the ground, the harder it would be. I pushed myself back on all fours and turned to face him.

He was watching me.

Of course he was. I met his stare, refusing to back down. I needed

him to get arrogant … careless … This was probably one of the worst ideas I'd ever had, but Cole needed help, and Rage was safe for now. At least until Nate finished with all the conscious ones. He was sick and sadistic, so he wanted to enjoy his prey.

Needing him to stay distracted from Jess and Cole, I pretended to limp with my front left paw. The more injured he thought I was, the less guarded he would be.

I needed to try to direct his attack. If he thought my left side hurt, he was going to try to use it to his advantage. I quickened my pace, making it appear that I was running as fast as I could.

His shoulders shook as if he was laughing in this form. He sat as he watched me race toward him.

When I was within striking distance, I jumped toward him as if I was protecting my hurt side.

He twisted around so his teeth sunk into my front left leg.

This time, I didn't have to pretend, I whimpered as I dropped to the ground. Obviously, my plan hadn't worked at all.

A loud roar filled the air as Damien left Cole and raced toward us. His eyes were locked on the blood pouring from my leg.

Nate dug in deeper as he kept his focus on Damien. As if he was trying to traumatize me with pain while Damien was watching not one but two of his friends bleed out.

This was my chance. Mustering all of my strength, I lifted my head, pretending to look at Damien. Thankfully, the moon hit the necklace for a quick second. It was only a few inches away since he was latched on to my leg. I jerked forward and caught the necklace between my teeth.

Nate jerked back, inadvertently helping me pull it off his neck, breaking the chain.

Nate tripped and howled as the magic began to leave his body. His wolf began to shrink right before our eyes. The whole time, he thrashed in pain, and sickening sounds of cartilage breaking filled the air.

I stumbled back, not wanting the chance of my injured paw getting hit. Blood was oozing from the bite, and my head began to spin. I needed to change into my human form so I could clean and bandage it.

A large nose nudged me on the side, and Damien's signature pine and cypress smell filled my nose.

He was checking on me. Even through everything, Damien was worried about us all. I dropped the necklace and licked the side of his face letting him know I was okay.

That's all he needed before he made his way over to the whimpering wolf. In just that short time span, Nate's wolf had shrunk

to about the same size as Rage's.

Damien leaned over the wolf and stared him straight in the eyes.

The gray wolf whimpered and whined as if he was crying.

Although that didn't mean a damn thing. He had injured Rage, almost killed Cole, and enjoyed watching me wither in pain. If that wasn't a sign of a psychopath, I wasn't sure what else was.

It was obvious that Damien felt the same because he grabbed the wolf by the neck and cut through his artery.

Blood gushed from Nate's form as his eyes widened in surprise before slowly shutting.

I had to turn away, not able to watch this. I was still haunted by the time I had to kill Ashley.

When I turned to glance back at Cole, he was standing and leaning on Jess. When I saw the blood trickling down my friend's neck, I realized what happened. She had given him some of her blood to speed up his healing.

At least that was one less person I had to worry about. I took off toward my mate, who laid unconscious at the bottom of the large tree. Our connection was intact, so he wasn't dead … yet.

Hoping that our mate bond would help me recover, I laid next to him. My right side touching his.

I WASN'T sure how long I laid there, but footsteps were heading my direction.

"Raven, I brought you some clothes." Jess appeared next to me and laid a set of clothes for me and another set for Rage beside me. "Why don't you go get dressed while I see if I can wake Rage up." She held her hand out toward me. "I've got some smelling salts that should do the trick."

I wanted to argue, but I did need to take care of the bite on my arm. I slowly stood on all fours and grabbed the clothes with my teeth. I limped over to one of the larger trees and hid behind it.

The shift back to human form hurt this time. Usually it didn't, but when you were injured in one form, shifting into your other form caused pain. I couldn't hold back my whimpers as I forced the change.

When I was finally back in human form, I put on the huge shirt and rolled up the boxers at least ten times so they wouldn't fall down. Ugh, I certainly was a sight to behold.

I stepped back into the small clearing and found Rage shaking his head as he stood on all fours.

"Thank God you're okay." I hurried over to him and began to wrap my arms around him when my arm began to throb.

His wolf eyes landed straight on my arm, seeing the teeth marks

torn into my skin. He whined and then grabbed the clothes running off toward a tree.

"He's going to be pissed." Jess arched an eyebrow as she looked over at me. "Just like I am."

"Yeah, I know." I couldn't keep the smile from spreading though. "It was either you or me, and I chose me."

"You could have died." Jess threw her hands in the air. "I don't know how to feel about it. On one hand, I'm glad you did what you did. Otherwise, Cole might not be here, but then I could've lost you." A tear traveled down her cheek, leaving a trail behind. "I don't know which one would've been worse. Yes, I love him, but I love you too."

To be honest, I had no clue what to say. I figured channeling Cole was the best thing to do in these types of situations. "Are you choosing to hit on me now?"

"Don't be a smart ass." However, a grin spread between her cheeks. "I don't need two Cole's running around."

"Why the hell not?" Cole's voice got louder the closer he came. "More Coles in the world are definitely needed."

My eyes flickered to the car before cold reality smacked me in the face. "Where's Angel?"

"She's fine." Jess scratched the back of her head. "She stayed hidden in the car the whole time. But she's had a hell of a night."

"We all have." Rage stepped from the tree, wearing a shirt that read 'Cole is the Best.' "Really, man?" He pointed at his shirt as he stared the vampire down.

"You have no idea how long I've waited for this moment." Cole winked at him. "This is the sexiest you'll ever be."

"What the hell did you do?" Already over the jokes, Rage rushed over and gently lifted my arm. "Did he do that?"

"Don't be too rough on her. She's the only reason why we're all standing." Damien hurried out of a section of the woods behind the car. "He's taken care of."

I hadn't even thought about Nate. "Where is he?" How long had I been out of it?

"While you were resting, Cole and Damien took his body a few miles away and buried him." Jess frowned and shivered. "I'm ready for this night to be over."

She wasn't the only one. "We have to do something about his car."

"I'm going to handle it." Damien nodded toward the car. "My family has a junkyard that we can hide it in upstate."

"Do you need someone to go with you?" I didn't want him to handle this alone. It was all of our pack's burden.

"No, Cole needs rest. You need to go back to school and visit the healer, and Rage may have a concussion." Damien sighed and ran his

hand through his hair. “I’m the only non-injured one, so it makes sense for it to be me. I’ll be back in the morning. But you guys are going to have to figure out what to do with Angel.” He glanced at his watch and looked around. “I’ve got to get going. The longer it takes, the more people are going to be looking for the car and Nate. We’ll catch up when I get back tomorrow.”

“Be safe.” Rage nodded at him and then gingerly lifted my arm.

Thankfully, the bleeding had stopped, and it was beginning to heal. “Call us if you need anything.”

“Sure will.” He strolled to the black car and climbed into the driver seat.

We all stayed silent as Damien pulled out into the road and began driving north.

“I guess, let’s head back, and Angel can stay in our dorm room for the night.” I wasn’t sure what other options we had since we couldn’t take her to her foster parents. We had to take her somewhere that she was safe from The Elites and from herself.

“That probably is the best decision.” Jess sighed and glanced at the car. “We’ll figure it out tomorrow and go from there.”

Cole handed Jess the keys. “Are you okay to drive? I’m a little dizzy.”

“Yeah, Damien stayed so you didn’t take too much blood. That’s one reason why Raven got hurt.” She gave me a sad smile. “I’m sorry.”

“Hey, it all worked out.” I didn’t want her to feel any guilt for protecting the one she loved.

“Because you kicked ass and yanked his little magic voodoo off.” Cole reached over and gave me a hug. “I bow to your awesomeness.”

“Yeah, no.” Knowing him, he was being serious, and I certainly didn’t want that. “Don’t do that.”

“Oh, the necklace.” I ran over to the spot where I had dropped it. Luckily, it was easy to find, and I picked it up.

“Let’s get back.” Rage hurried to the car. “Raven needs her wound cleaned before it heals completely. It can’t become infected.”

AS WE PULLED into the academy, the stress of the night finally caught up to me. Angel was sitting on my right side while Rage was on the left. The entire way, Rage was tense and kept gazing at my arm.

Jess pulled into the parking spot and looked around. “I’ll take Angel to the dorm while the three of you head to the healer’s office.”

“Are you okay with that?” This sweet girl had already been through hell at a tender age. I couldn’t even fathom how she felt about it all.

“Yes, I’m exhausted.” Angel yawned as she said the last word. She opened the passenger door to get out when she paused. “Thank you. I don’t know what I would’ve done without your help.”

If only she knew the dark future she had, but she’d been through enough today. “Of course. We will always do what we can to help you.” I had to be careful with my words. I couldn’t promise her she’d be okay.

“Hurry.” Jess hissed. “We need to get inside before someone sees. I can only hide you for so long with my spell.”

The girl nodded and ran after her.

By the time we all three got out of the car, the girl and Jess were gone. Luckily, it was a Friday night, and the dorm would be pretty empty.

“We’re a sight to behold.” I snorted as I took in each of our appearances.

Cole had blood trickling from his neck, but it was in the process of healing. I had my arm that still throbbed, and Rage looked like he had a rough night.

The three of us entered the healer’s office. That was one of the nice things about our academy. A healer always had to be available for any alpha shenanigans that may happen.

When the gentleman saw us enter, his jaw dropped.

“ALL THREE OF you need to go back to your dorm and rest.” The healer tsked as he pushed us through the door.

As I stepped out, I froze in place. Right in front of me was Isadora.

“Good evening, Miss Wright.” Her voice was sharper than normal, and her usual short, well-kept hair was slightly skewed. “I hear you and your crew had another unusual night.”

For all I knew, this lady could have been part of The Elites. We had to be careful. “We had a skating mishap.”

“Skating?” She leaned back against the wall behind her.

“Well, why are you so surprised by that?” Cole appeared next to me and winked at the headmaster. “When I bust my moves, everyone watches. Her and Rage fell while they watched me cut a rug … no, wait … bust a skate.”

“I don’t know if I have the patience for this tonight.” Her green eyes had dark circles underneath them. “Mr. Smith, do you think I buy that story when you’ve had your neck attacked and she has a deep bite on her left arm?”

“See … it was an unfortunate mishap.” Cole was gearing up for a story. “See, I distracted them, and Raven fell on Rage, which caused my teeth to sink into her arm as a pole sliced through mine. It’s rather

simple." He put a hand over the bite so she couldn't see that it wasn't a typical vampire bite.

"You are dismissed, Mr. Smith." She pointed toward the end of the hallway.

"But …"

"Go." She stepped forward and narrowed her eyes. "Don't make me call your father."

"It's okay." Rage patted him on the back. "I'll be here with her."

"Fine, but that's my story, and I'm sticking to it." Cole turned on his heels and marched down the hall.

I had to try to keep him out of trouble. "He …"

"Don't worry, Miss Wright. I won't call. He left." She glanced both ways and waved us to follow her. "Let's go to my office."

We walked in silence and filed into her office. Once Rage and I passed her, she shut her door. "How I feel like we've been in a similar position before."

"Yeah, it does feel a little like déjà vu." Rage sat next to me, and his hand gingerly touched my injured arm.

"Ever since Raven joined our school, things have gotten strange." Isadora paced behind her desk, not even bothering to sit down. "Let me just cut to the chase. I think you know something about a secret society that has somehow found a way into this school."

"What?" I hadn't expected her to be so blunt, and I wasn't entirely sure if this wasn't a test.

"You heard me." She snarled and placed her hands on her hips. "Because that would be something I would know, right?"

Oh, crap. She was part of the society and about to expose what we had done. "Let us explain."

"Before you humor me with a lie. Let me tell you that I know it has something to do with hybrids and racism." Isadora stopped in her tracks as she looked out the window of her office. "That's one reason why I've made sure the dorms are mixed up instead of segregated, keeping only the same races together as roommates."

"So you're not part of this … society." Rage narrowed his eyes, waiting for her response.

"Of course not." Isadora slammed her hand on the desk. "This society has been trying to get their claws into this school for years now. We have the best of the best, and they want the same. I need to determine who all here is involved and clean house."

"They approached me." I don't know why, but something told me she was being truthful. "It started the night that I … Ashley was killed."

"And you joined?" Her face was indifferent. There wasn't any judgment, at least visibly.

“Of course. I don’t want those kids to die.” That appeared to be an important factor that she was conveniently overlooking.

“Die?” She tilted her head and squinted her eyes.

“Yeah, when their two sides war against one another.” Rage’s voice sounded like a question.

“Is that what they are telling you? That’s why I needed you to find the hybrid they had staged. They were after Raven, but I didn’t realize the propaganda that they used.” She sat in her seat and closed her eyes. “It’s not true. No wonder I’ve been failing.”

“What’s not true?” I must have missed a piece of the puzzle all of a sudden.

“Hybrids.” She raised her head and looked me square in the eye. “They aren’t in danger of their sides fighting against one another. We discourage them because they wind up being more powerful than a full breed.”

“What?” Rage’s voice was barely a whisper.

“But your class …” None of this made sense.

“So that’s what Jonathan’s new class is all about.” She sighed and leaned back in her seat. “I’ve thought for a while he might be part of it. Every time I ask him about his new class, he’s very evasive.”

For some reason, Nate’s pendant in my pocket felt like a weight.

“You didn’t know?” Rage crossed his arms in his seat. “This is all a little too convenient.”

“I wish it were.” She rubbed her hands together and worry lined her face. “I had a feeling tonight that something bad was happening. You went for someone, didn’t you?”

At this point, we’d told her this much. “Yes, and we have her in my dorm, hiding.” However, I wasn’t going to volunteer information about what had happened to Nate.

“A half-breed is here?” Her shoulders sagged a little. “But the society will figure it out.”

“No, we stole her while they were busy inside a gas station.” Rage gently squeezed my fingers. “They didn’t know we were following them. We were supposed to head back after they took her from the skating rink.”

“That’s why Cole gave such a preposterous story that involved skating.” A small grin spread across her face.

I’d never seen this lady come so close to smiling, and it caught me off guard. It showed that Cole could charm anyone. “Yeah, but they aren’t part of it. We had him to help us follow them. Only Rage and I are in it. But obviously, not for much longer.” I wasn’t about to let her know who all was involved.

“I’ll take care of the half-breed in your room. I have a safe place for her to go. You, however, need to stay.” She stood again. “I’ve been

wanting a way to figure out who the players are, and now you've given it to me."

"What are they doing to the hybrids they've taken?" If this was all about power, the answer probably isn't a good one.

"I'm not sure." Isadora began pacing once more. "That's one thing we need to figure out."

"I don't know." The thought of helping them capture more half-breeds made my stomach turn, especially now that I knew the truth. "I can't keep up this charade."

"Yes, you may have to help them catch a few more, but that could lead to us figuring out what they're doing to all of them." She looked at me, not even bothering to address Rage. "No matter who is involved, there is at least one person who has high ranking in the overall supernatural council. In all honesty, there are several that are corrupt. They let you in for a reason, so you and Rage are the only ones I can trust. Together we can bring them down."

"It's not fair to put that much pressure on us." Rage's shoulders tensed, ready to take on the headmaster for the both of us.

"No, she's right." She was right. This was only going to get worse if we didn't try to prevent it. "We need to figure out who all is involved and take them down."

"Are you sure?" Rage turned toward me and brushed his fingers along my cheek. "This isn't our fight."

Except it kind of was. They were painting a picture of hybrids as a bad thing. Making Jess and Cole feel as if their relationship was tainted and wrong. Instead of bringing all races together, the society was hellbent on ripping them apart. That's not how it was meant to be. With both of their kind hearts, no matter what happened, I knew they would do the right thing. "She's right. Think of Angel. She didn't deserve this tonight. We need to help her. We need to help all of them."

"If it means that much to you, I'm in. I just don't want you to keep getting hurt."

"I couldn't live with myself if I knew there was a chance that we could make a difference and we turned our backs on them." The more I thought about it, the more confident I became in the decision.

"You're right." Rage turned to Isadora. "I'm in."

"Great, but you guys need to carry on just like before. Act like you believe it." Isadora straightened her shoulders and grinned. "Now let me get the girl situated before more eyes begin searching for her."

For the first time in my life, I had a purpose that I fully believed in. A future that I had determined all on my own, and I was ready.

The End

BOOK 3

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Chapter One

All of the frustrations of the past months had been weighing on me. Sweat drenched my brow as I punched the black bag that was dangling right in front of me. With all the paranoia here lately, it felt like the punching bag was mocking me.

A sweet scent filled the air, letting me know that my vampire friend had arrived.

“What did that bag ever do to you?” Cole leaned against the gray wall as his ice-blue eyes twinkled with mischief. As usual, his blond hair was perfectly styled, and he wore the standard guys’ dress code for Bloodshed Academy of a black shirt and khaki pants.

Of course, now would be the time that he appeared. “It’s just hanging there.” I wiped my forehead and tightened my ponytail. My wet, dark brown hair stuck to my neck and the sides of my face.

“Leave her alone, Cole.” Damien walked back into the gym. Somehow, he had managed to lock down the room for our training sessions. It was one big room with weights, a punching bag, and some weapons.

He and I both knew that Cole wouldn’t be leaving any time soon. He had boundary issues, no filter, and was as loyal as they come.

“Otherwise you might meet the same fate as the bag.” I swung again, hitting the bag as hard as I could. I had never felt so helpless before. My life had been chaotic ever since I’d come to this school. Between finally connecting with my wolf and joining a secret society, my life had gone from boring to overstimulating.

The secret society known as The Elites pretended to be for the good of all supernatural races. They claimed that half-breeds were in danger and needed to be sought out to help them. However, in January, we learned that it was all a ruse and that the half-breeds were usually more powerful than a purebred. Granted, we learned that truth after we had to kill a narcissistic asshole shifter named Nate, who somehow had a necklace that made him powerful and a huge freaking wolf.

Luckily, the girl who was the target got away. Isadora, the headmaster of Bloodshed, had used some of her sources to keep the girl hidden. At least for now, she was safe.

“Promises, promises.” Cole winked at me.

“How in the world do Rage and Jess both not get jealous of you always hitting on Raven?” Damien shook his head and ran his fingers through his auburn hair.

At first, Damien wasn’t so sure about me. But after a while, he

began to trust me, and I became a part of his circle. He was fine as hell and built like an MMA fighter, which made sense since he was a bear shifter.

"Because he knows we'll kill him if he ever acts on it." Rage's raspy voice came from behind Damien. "And I'd enjoy every second of watching you wither in pain." He stepped next to Cole, which emphasized that he was slightly taller and more muscular. His dark shaggy hair almost matched his warm, dark chocolate eyes.

He was my true mate, and I was one damn lucky wolf-shifter to have him.

"Oh, stop." Cole batted his eyes at Rage. "You know you're the only one for me, big boy."

"Stop being an idiot." Rage made his way over to me and wrapped his arm around my waist.

Even through my tank top, I could feel the warmth of his hands. "I stink."

"No, you're perfect." He brushed his lips against mine and sighed. "How much longer are you going to be?"

"I'm going to have to lock this door." Damien pointed at Rage then Cole. "You two out."

"Fine, but I was going to leave in a second." Cole lifted his chin in the air. "I have a secret date with Jess here in a little while anyway."

Ever since the night we had saved the girl, Jess and Cole made it official despite them having to keep their relationship hidden. The Elites were completely against interracial couples. For Rage and me to be accepted within the society, two of our best friends of different races couldn't appear to be dating. They'd have doubts and question our allegiance to their cause. Or at least that's what Isadora said. "Then go already. Don't be late." I spun out of Rage's arms and kissed his cheek. "I've got to train some more.'

"I'll stay here and watch." He scanned me from head to toe.

Of course, my body just had to respond.

"Absolutely not." Damien motioned to the door. "Please exit. The stronger she gets, the better."

My first two years here had been all about syncing with my wolf and learning how to fight supernaturals of all types. Between the time Rage's psychotic fling had attacked me and the night our group took on Nate's wolf, I finally got those down pat. Now, my training was all about strength and endurance.

Rage rolled his eyes. "Yes, I'll be a good boy and go help train the freshmen."

That was the thing. Technically, Damien, Rage, and Cole would be graduating, but it wasn't going to happen. The main reason was due to the society. Both Rage and I were infiltrating the group, but also,

Isadora claimed she needed the three of them for extra help. So they were here for yet another year, which didn't upset me in the least. I needed them.

"I'll see you in a couple of hours." I loved the man, but I needed to focus. There was no telling what our future held at this point.

"Fine." Rage slapped my ass and chuckled. "Love you."

It was the first time he'd ever done something so personal in front of other before, and I couldn't believe I enjoyed it. Still, Damien was right there, so I tried to shrug it off.

"Love you, too." My words came out breathless, but I was going to blame the kickboxing.

A huge smile filled his face as he strolled to the back of the room and exited into the hallway that led to the exit.

When the door shut, Damien frowned. "Who gave those idiots a key?"

"Should I name the most likely culprit?" I couldn't hide the grin that crossed my face.

"No, but how the hell did Cole get a copy?" He shook his head and sighed. "The reason we were able to get this place to ourselves was because Isadora wants to make sure you're at your strongest when shit hits the fan."

That was very comforting and the reason I had been so antsy. Ever since the night Nate was killed and the hybrid went missing, I hadn't heard a word from The Elites, and Jordan avoided me like the plague.

Normally, it would be a blessing that the bitch avoided me, but she was my main connection to the society. Her going silent made me worry that they might suspect us. Rage had been telling me over and over again that we'd be dead if they had known, and if I let my anxiety get the best of me, they would find something. Although, it was hard to sit here and wait for the other shoe to drop.

To top it all off, I learned last Christmas that my parents had come to this school and hid it from me my whole life. No, wait … they did so much worse than that. They purposely gave me a necklace that ensured I couldn't connect fully with my wolf so that the Academy couldn't find me. It became clear that they had hoped the Academy recruits were coming for my loser ex-boyfriend instead of me. After all, he was the alpha's son in our pack. The same day I got engaged to Rage, all of this blew up in my face.

Channeling my nervous energy, I took it all out on the bag for the next thirty minutes.

"GOOD, YOU'RE DOING GREAT." Damien clapped his hands and smiled. "I think that's enough for today." He threw a white towel in

my direction.

My body had changed in the last several months. I'd always been slim, but now I had a little bit of muscle that would peek through every now and then.

I used the towel to wipe the perspiration off my face and neck. I needed a shower and fast. I could smell my own body odor, but the workout helped relieve a lot of tension. "Well, I'm heading back to the dorms to take a shower. See you at dinner."

"You do know there is a shower in the girls' locker room, right?" His forehead creased as he tilted his head ever so slightly.

"When was the last time you heard me say I was going to shower in there?" No, it wasn't happening. "All those hussies go in there, and I don't want to touch anything they've used ... ever." Luckily with Damien, I wouldn't get a perverted comment in return.

"I don't know what to say to that." Damien cleared his throat and took an awkward step back. "So, I'm going to pretend we didn't have this conversation. See you later." He turned around and headed toward the guys' locker room in the back.

Not wanting to spend another second like that, I threw the towel in the bin and headed toward my dorm. I was able to make it back to my room in minutes.

As I walked through the door, I found Cole and Jess on our couch in the den. "Hey, guys."

"Hey." Jess jumped to her feet and held out a magazine. "I was telling Cole about what I got you."

"Uh … Thank you?" I never read magazines, so I wasn't sure how to react.

"Stop it." She held the magazine up so the title was clear.

"Oh, Bridal Guide." At least it made sense now. "You know we haven't gotten a lot nailed down."

"Exactly, so you need this push." Jess took a step closer to me and extended her hand. "Take it."

Just when I thought I was in the clear, she stood in front of me. "First off, I stink and feel nasty."

"I'm so glad you said that because it was about to get pretty awkward." Cole slumped in the seat and let out a long breath. "You're killing me here. Go smell pretty again."

"Hmmm ... Maybe I should hang out here a little longer." I grabbed the guide and pretended like I was going to sit next to him.

"That's fine. I can take it." Cole lifted his head and met my gaze dead-on. "Come sit by me."

Jess giggled as she watched us. "If you aren't showering, let's start planning." Her violet eyes lit up.

She totally called my bluff. "Let me take a shower first. I was

having fun with him for a minute."

"Scoot." She grabbed the magazine from me and hit me with it. "Go now."

"Fine." I stood and stuck my tongue out at Cole. "Until next time." I turned and headed down the hallway on the left that led to my room and bathroom.

AFTER I SHOWERED AND DRESSED, I headed back to the den. As soon as I stepped into the hallway, Rage's earthy scent hit me. I rushed into the den and found Jess sitting at the table. She had already started in on the wedding stuff, getting it all organized.

Rage stepped in from the kitchen with a glass of water in his hand. "Hey, you." He grinned at me, which could easily have been my undoing.

I bounced over and stood on my tiptoes, kissing his lips. "Hey yourself. How were the freshmen?"

"Intolerable." He tapped me on the nose. "Be glad I think you're worth it."

"Okay, before we can select a color scheme, what date have you two agreed on?" Jess tapped a pencil on our square kitchen table. It was made of wood and was able to seat four.

"We haven't planned anything yet. You know that." We hung out every day, so she should've known better.

"It's worse than I feared." She glanced at my left hand. "You still have the gorgeous ring on, so I'm thinking it's still on."

"We're true mates." Of course, it was still on. She should know better than that.

"It's been a rough couple of months." Rage winked at me and gave Jess a small grin. "We needed to lay low anyway."

"Okay, fine." Jess nodded and leaned back in her seat. "What month are you wanting to get wed in?"

"Oh, I don't know." It sounded bad that we'd been engaged for around eight months and we hadn't discussed a date. I looked at Rage. "Do you have a preference?"

"This is a trap," Cole called from his seat. "May Day. May Day."

"Shut up." Jess wrinkled her nose at him. "It is not."

"I've always thought a December wedding would be nice." Rage shrugged. "I know it's probably not ideal but thought it would be cool."

"Do you think this will all be done by then?" December was four months away.

"Sure, we can plan it in four months." Jess nodded and clapped her hands.

I understood that Jess was trying to help, but the whole society part of things worried me. We could plan something, and it would all be ruined because we had to leave at a moment's notice to either find a hybrid or deal with something regarding the council. Hell, I hadn't told my parents about our engagement yet. I wasn't sure if a wedding was a good idea right now.

Chapter Two

As Jess, Rage, and I made our way to the cafeteria, my stomach started growling. Last night had been intense. Somehow, both Rage and Jess had gotten me to agree on a wedding date. I didn't have the heart to tell them I thought it was a bad idea because Jess was so happy and Rage perked up.

When we reached the building, we happened to run into Jordan on her way out. She had her long black hair braided, and of course, her tall blonde shadow, Madison, was right beside her. Jordan tried to walk around us without a word, but I'd had enough.

I gently grabbed her arm. "Hey, how are you doing?"

Her golden eyes flashed at me, but she took a steadying breath. "What do you want?"

Her arrogant demeanor was off for some reason. "Can we talk alone for a second?"

"If she wanted to talk to you, she would've." Madison hissed at me as she took a threatening step in my direction. "Keep it up, pup. I may have to kick your ass again."

Last year, Damien had me train with Madison so I could practice fighting different races. The first time, she had kicked my ass in less than five minutes, but the last one, I'd held my ground. "I'd like to see you try. Remember the last time Damien had to step in to break us apart."

Jordan must have seen something in my eyes because she raised her hand, telling her friend to stop. "It'll just be a second."

"What?" Madison's mouth dropped open. "You've been trying …"

"Enough." Jordan spun around and glared at her friend. "I said give me a minute."

"Let's go outside." Rage stepped close, brushing his arm against my shoulder. "It's a little crowded in here."

"Sounds good." Jordan strode past us, hurrying out the door.

"There's the guys." Jess pointed over to our usual table which was in the center. "I'll go ahead, grab some food, and meet you there."

She knew what I was doing, and I was grateful for her. If it had been Cole here, he would've demanded to go with us.

"We shouldn't be long." I hadn't planned on confronting Jordan. However, this was the closest I'd been to her for months, so I needed to take full advantage of the situation.

Rage grabbed my hand and we marched out the door, leaving a huffy Madison behind.

"This isn't the way it works." Jordan shook her head as she

pointed at me. “I’m to reach out to you, not the other way around.”

“Well, things change when you go radio silent on us for months.” I had to pretend I didn’t know anything about Nate or the girl. “Every couple of months, we had targets and now, nothing? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Look, there has been some kind of hang up.” Her eyes narrowed, and she placed a hand on her hip. “Don’t you think it’s odd that Nate hasn’t been around?”

“No, I found that to be a blessing.” Rage chuckled and tugged on my hand. “We were hoping he got kicked out or failed.”

“So, you don’t know anything.” She crossed her arms, looking the both of us over.

I hoped to God that my face remained indifferent. We needed to convince her that we hadn’t been involved.

“Well, Nate ran off with that mermaid girl.” Jordan huffed and tapped her foot on the ground. “And I’m getting blamed for it. But we can’t find him anywhere, so the society is laying low for a little while and focusing on that search.”

“Really?” I had to act surprised. “I wouldn’t expect that from him.”

“Yeah, he was a little too eager to be part of the society.” Rage stared off toward a point behind Jordan in deep thought.

“Ain’t that the truth.” Jordan dropped her hands and shrugged. “I told them that same thing when I got introduced to him last summer, but they said I was overreacting. That they had him locked in. Guess they were wrong.”

No, they weren’t at all. They must have locked him in with the promise of him and his brother having some kind of job. “So, we wait?”

“I’m still trying to get my name cleared, so yeah.” She glanced around as if someone was watching us. “Until then, leave me the hell alone.”

“Look, we aren’t too thrilled about all this either.” Rage’s tone had a hard edge to it. “So why don’t you at least be a little respectful. Otherwise, you may not have such willing participants.”

“Do you think you can get out of this now?” Her loud laugh hurt my ears. “You’re in the society whether you like it or not. There’s no going back. You stay in or die. It’s for life. You may think you’re above everything and everyone, but that’s bullshit.”

Her words didn’t surprise me, but her reaction wasn’t what I had expected. It was almost somber and haunted as if she’d seen things. The kinds of things that left someone scarred.

“What did they do to you?” The words escaped before I could hold them back.

“Why would you ask that?” She flinched and sucked in a deep

breath. Her face was a mask of indifference except for the clenching of her jaw.

I'd hit a nerve. "It seemed like you knowing that … might be from experience."

"Just because you somehow got those three to worship you doesn't mean you know everything." Her voice shifted into a higher octave that made my ears ring. "I've got to go."

"Wait." Shit, I hadn't planned to freak her out. We still needed more information. "I …"

She turned around as the wind picked up, blowing a few loose strands of hair into her face. "No, you've done enough." She spun back around and headed toward the girls' dorms.

"I didn't mean to run her off." I hated how everything had gone down.

"Don't worry about it." Rage leaned over and kissed my cheek. "It wasn't on purpose, and she was way out of line anyway. Besides, I'm sure we got everything we could out of her."

The cafeteria door slammed, and Madison marched straight up to me. "I knew I shouldn't have left you alone with her. What did you do?"

"She didn't do anything." Rage stepped in front of me. "So back off."

I couldn't leave Rage on his own even though he was trying to protect me. "I can't help that she got her panties in a twist and wadded up her crack."

"There's always something happening around you." Madison rolled her pale green eyes and pointed a finger, which appeared more offensive with the blood-red nail polish she always used. "Leave us alone." She huffed and rushed to catch up with Jordan.

"Hey, are you okay?" Rage stood in front of me, looking down into my eyes.

"Yeah, I'll be fine." He was right. It wasn't on purpose. "Let's go eat."

He ran a finger down my cheek. "You're a strong, kind-hearted woman, and I love you."

Those words were exactly what I needed. "I love you too."

"Come on." He took my hand and tugged me gently to the door. "Let's go feed you before your belly rumbles again."

"What am I? A two-year-old?" Though it was kind of embarrassing earlier when my stomach growled while we were cuddling.

"Nope, you're a wolf that is working out hard and needs more food to compensate for that." He held the door open for me.

"Fine, we'll stick with that." I made my way inside and went straight for the food bar. I piled my plate full of eggs, bacon, and

French toast.

Within a few seconds, both Rage and I joined the others at the table. I sat next to Jess, and Rage sat on the other side of me.

"What happened out there?" Cole leaned toward us. "It looked like Jordan was about to snap."

"Right." Jess took a big bite of her pancakes. "You'll have to teach us your way, oh great one."

"Just trying to figure out what was going on …" I couldn't say the words out loud, so I was hoping they'd get the picture. "Apparently, things are quiet for a while." I hated that I couldn't be open with my friends. I had a feeling we were going to have long stretches of time where we couldn't act.

"It doesn't seem as if Raven's super happy." Damien glanced at the table and shook his head.

"No, I'm not, but thanks for the praise." I took a bite of my French toast and glanced at my plate.

"That bitch would cut you down in a second if she was able." Cole took a long drink of his red liquid breakfast. "You have to remember that. Yes, be kind to those you find worthy, and forget the rest who wouldn't piss on you if you were on fire."

"I kind of agree with him." Damien wrinkled his nose and shook his head. "I'm not sure how I feel about that."

They did have a point. "Well then, it's a good thing I tolerate you all." I stuck my tongue out at Cole and Damien.

"So, all I heard you say is you'd pee on me." Cole looked at me and held his drink out. "Cheers."

"I'm not sure if I'd go that far." Had he lost his damn mind? "I mean, I'm not going to come over and hike my leg up on you."

"Dammit, I'd been so close." Cole frowned and looked at Rage. "If she won't do it, you'll have to."

"Are you planning on catching fire?" Rage took a bite of his bacon as he leaned back in his seat. He glanced over at Damien, who was sitting next to him.

"Am I planning on it? No." Cole raised his pointer finger. "But you should always plan for every alternative. You see. I think of myself as a prepper."

"You do know what a prepper is?" Rage tilted his head and narrowed his eyes.

"Of course he doesn't," Damien grumbled under his breath.

"Of course I do." Cole leaned toward Damien. "I do."

"Then please." Damien turned his body so he was facing Cole. "Enlighten us."

"Well, since you're so interested." Cole lifted his chin in the air and took a deep breath. "It is a person, similar to myself, who plans for

any possibility."

"That's not a prepper." Damien grabbed his fork and shoveled a big bite of eggs into his mouth.

"Then pray tell, what exactly is a prepper?" Cole grinned as if he was winning the battle.

"Someone who stores supplies in the event of a natural disaster or government breakdown." Damien arched an eyebrow. "Is that what you are?"

"In a way." Cole struggled not to frown, but the corners of his mouth were facing downward. "I mean, it's preparing for a possibility."

He was stretching it now. I had to force myself not to laugh or I'd choke on my food.

"Oh, Cole." Jess mashed her lips together. "What you are talking about is foresight. Not prepping."

"Huh." Cole rubbed his pointer finger and thumb against his chin. "Foresight. That sounds even better. A foresightist."

"No. No." Damien placed his fork on his plate. "It's not a foresightist. You have the gift of foresight."

"Awe, thank you, buddy." Cole reached over and patted Damien on the shoulder. "I almost thought you'd argue."

"What? No." Damien shook his head. "I …"

"You're right. I shouldn't have doubted you." Cole grinned. "It is pretty obvious."

Rage waved his hand at Damien. "Just stop."

At this point, Damien had no way of winning this. It was fun to watch the two of them together. Cole would always ramble on while Damien always tried to correct him. It always led here to this exact moment—to Damien giving up.

Life would be boring without Cole. That was for sure.

THE NEXT FEW weeks went by in slow motion. We had settled on a date for the wedding, which was December tenth. Meaning at this point, I needed to call my parents. I'd been avoiding their calls and texts ever since I discovered they had lied to me. Although, Rage's mom, Audrey, was determined to talk to my mom about the wedding. At the end of the day, my parents would need to be there since it was part of the mating section of the wedding.

"I don't want to do this." I sat on the couch in our den with my legs in Rage's lap. I had the phone in my hand, staring hard at my parents' phone number.

"You don't have to." Rage smiled at me. "I can tell my mom no, and we can have a wedding without the mating part. We're true

mates, so technically, we don't have to do it."

That was a true statement, but it was supposed to strengthen our bond. Granted, it wouldn't be like chosen mates where the bond isn't there at all and the mating ceremony forced it. True mates still connected more since their wolves sync together. "No, I want to." It was true, but I still wasn't past the hurt or close to forgiving them. They had refused to tell me the reasons for their betrayal.

Even though Rage and I hadn't discussed it, there was another reason why his mother was so invested in me talking to my mother. The sooner I did, the quicker Audrey would get to talk to her long-lost best friend. That was the other thing we had learned on Christmas day right after we got engaged. She showed Rage and me a picture of the day she had gotten engaged to Matthew. When I looked at the picture, there was no doubt in my mind that her friend who had disappeared was my mother.

"You're psyching yourself out." Rage rubbed my legs. "If it gets to be too much, you can always hang up."

Yes, I could. I took a deep breath, and before I could rethink it, I pressed the call button.

It rang once before my mom answered the phone. "Raven, is that you?"

"Yeah, it's me." This was the first time talking to her had ever felt awkward. She had been my rock for so long that where we were in our relationship felt strange.

"I'm so glad you called." Mom's voice cracked as though she was close to crying. "I've been wanting to talk to you."

"You finally ready to tell me why you lied to me … purposely gave me something that kept me and my wolf from syncing?" Them not telling me why hurt me the most. They didn't trust me.

"No, we can't." She huffed and cleared her throat. "We're trying to protect you."

"A lot of good it's done so far." It pissed me off. It was as if they still viewed me as a little girl.

"That's not fair." Birds chirped on her end of the phone, so she must've gone outside.

"Look, I'm not calling to have the same argument." We didn't need another repeat of our Christmas Day conversation, and it was already heading in that direction. "Rage and I are engaged, and we finally decided on the date of the ceremony."

Silence was the response.

I waited a few more seconds. "Mom?"

"Uh, yeah. I'm here." She took a deep breath. "I didn't realize you had gotten engaged. I mean, I'm not surprised since he's your true mate, but …"

“It happened Christmas Day, and then things continued coming up that prevented us from telling you.” Ugh, maybe I should have told her earlier. I could tell her feelings were hurt. “Well, anyway, it’s going to be December 10th.”

“Where at?”

“In Pelham, Alabama.” His mom wanted to have it there. She said there was a perfect place for our ceremony.

“Are you joining their pack?” She laughed for a second. “Or have you already?”

“No, Rage left his pack.” I didn’t want to get into this with her. “I wanted to let you know. I think Audrey is wanting to call you.”

“Of course.” She paused for a second. “Do not tell them where we live, but you can give her my number.”

The crazy kept getting better. “Yeah, Okay.” At least that was one thing resolved. “Talk to you later.” I hung up the phone before she could respond.

“Was it as bad as you expected?” Rage frowned, and his face was full of concern.

“Not as bad, per se.” It was difficult to explain. “Just strange.”

I was beginning to think there was no way to salvage my relationship with my parents. There were too many secrets between us.

Chapter Three

A few days later, I headed out to the woods, wanting to run in my wolf form. I tried to at least get a few hours in every couple of days. It was relaxing and helped with handling my stress.

I left my clothes in some bushes at the entrance of the woods and shifted to all fours, taking off. I sometimes missed the buzzing of my pack members in my head. It was strange, though. From what I had always been told, as a rogue wolf, I should have a deep void that would slowly wear me down. It had been a year since I'd left my pack, and it still hadn't happened. There was warmth remaining in that void, just not any of the noise.

Not wanting to stress about it, I pushed my paws harder into the ground, running at a fast pace. I hadn't been to the clearing in a while, so for some odd reason, I decided that's where I should go today. I'd avoided it after finding the dead half-breed and another note from The Elites, but that felt like a lifetime ago.

That poor hybrid had to have been tortured by the society. My stomach revolted at the thought. In some ways, I hoped the poor boy had died before they burned half his body and chewed on the other half. He had been a half-fae and half-wolf shifter. The society had told us that he grew to the age where his two halves attacked one another.

The birds chirped in the trees, and a few squirrels ran by. That was one of the nice things about being in wolf form; the forest was still alive as I passed by. In human form, things scattered and hid from me.

As I approached the clearing that held so much of my history, I slowed down and listened. This was the place where Damien and I had trained together for so long. Him in his bear form and me in my wolf. Trying to sync with my wolf, learning to become one with her, and eventually fighting Madison. Protecting myself and killing Ashley had happened here. All of it led back here in some form or fashion.

Silence was all that I heard. Not even a breeze swayed the trees. I took a deep breath, but nothing out of the ordinary stuck out.

Paranoia, that's all this was. I couldn't let a place hold power over me. I'd been avoiding this for so long, but for some reason, today was the day it was supposed to happen. I gathered my strength and forced myself to step out.

It was a beautiful place, a large oval-shaped opening with trees all around it. The grass grew a little high, and flowers blossomed in sections throughout. As I trotted into the opening, the sun shined down upon me. It warmed my fur and soothed my racing heart.

I walked over to the bunch of purple irises and took a deep breath.

They smelled as pretty as they appeared. A rustling noise snapped me back to reality, and I could tell it was coming from the same place Damien used to charge from. It had always been the same place.

If someone was there, I needed to see who it was. I rushed over to the section, not bothering to be quiet. As I turned the corner, Professor Shaw stood right there.

"Hello, dear." His short dark hair was a little longer, and his dark black eyes pierced my soul.

Between all that and his black outfit, I could only think that he enjoyed channeling the goth look. Of course, I couldn't respond to him in this form, so I stayed still, ready to run if necessary.

"I've been waiting for you to arrive." Professor Shaw lifted the crescent moon necklace my mother had given me, dangling it from his hand. "I can sense where you are with this pendant."

My stomach dropped. He must know that we were with Nate that night and have the enchanted wolf necklace that had made him huge. I couldn't move, my fear paralyzing me.

"We've run into a complication." He sighed and placed my necklace back in his pocket.

I wanted to growl, but I needed to hear him out. Maybe he would slip up and give me some hints without realizing it.

"This is strange, talking to you in wolf form, but it's the only time you're away from your bloody group of friends." He huffed and crossed his arms. "You see, I believe you're the wolf that I'm supposed to work with in order to fulfill my destiny. When you agreed to become a part of the society, I was ecstatic. So, due to your and Rage's dedication to the cause, we've decided that for now, Jordan will take a break from being your contact to the society. That means you get a promotion and will be handling the searches by yourself. I'll be contacting you in the next few days, so be ready."

The only thing I could do was nod my head. It was good news that we had a promotion of sorts. It also meant we could now confirm that Professor Shaw was at least one leak in the academy, but I wasn't quite sure what that ultimately meant for Jordan.

"All right, enjoy your run." He grinned and bowed his head slightly. When he straightened, there was a wicked glint in his eyes. "Are you sure you don't want to change to your human form?" A huge smirk filled his face. "I mean, I could make some more time for you if you'd like."

My skin crawled as his words sunk in. He knew that I would be naked if I changed to my human form. I shook my head no.

"Maybe next time?" He arched an eyebrow at me and winked. "We can keep it a secret from Rage." He licked his lips as he stared at my wolf hungrily and took a step toward me, running his fingers through

my fur.

It was way too intimate, and I took a few steps back, trying to gain distance. I needed a shower as soon as possible.

"At least consider it." He squatted so we were face level with one another. "I've seen how gorgeous you are. Maybe next time, yeah?" He stood and turned, walking deeper into the woods.

This whole thing was strange, and I almost cried with relief when he disappeared from my sight. At least The Elites weren't acting as if they were on to us. Still, we couldn't let our guard down.

AS I ENTERED OUR APARTMENT, I found Jess and Cole sitting on the couch, watching television.

"Did you enjoy your run?" Jess grabbed the remote and paused the show.

"It was … uh, interesting." It almost felt as if I had been summoned there while I was on my run.

"That's what all wolves say." Cole shook his head. "It's so amazing that I can be one with nature; blah, blah, blah."

"Really?" Sometimes he had some nerve. "Have you ever heard me say that?"

"Nope, but I figured it was coming eventually." He laid back in the seat and placed an arm around Jess. "Did you find a cocoon and watch a new butterfly emerge or a baby bird break out from its egg?"

"Are you on something?" That was the only explanation I could come up with. "Can vampires get high?"

"He always acts like this." Jess giggled and rolled her eyes. "Did you expect anything different?"

"I'm here, ladies." Cole waved with his free hand. "Hello."

"As if we could ever forget you were here." Jess reached out and pinched his cheeks.

"Hey, stop." He used both of his arms to swat her away. "That hurt."

"Poor baby." She leaned over and kissed his cheek. "Is that better?"

"Yeah, and something else hurts too." He pouted and lowered his head.

"Oh, what is it?" She baby talked to him.

"Right here." He pointed at his crotch.

"Ew, seriously." There are some things you can't unsee no matter how hard you try. "Hey, I'm standing here."

"Maybe you shouldn't be unless you want a show." Cole reached for the button on his khakis.

"Stop it." Jess smacked him in the chest. "Not here."

“So, later then?” He waggled his eyebrows.

“Now I understand how you feel about Rage and me.” I was glad they were so happy, but there were some things better left to the imagination. “But we can’t be that bad.”

“Maybe not verbally but still the same.” Jess snuggled into Cole’s arm, smiling wide.

There was a quick knock at the door, and then it swung open. Rage stepped over the threshold and headed straight over to me. “Are you okay?” He wrapped his strong arms around me and then stiffened. “Professor Shaw touched you.”

I hadn’t noticed how upset I’d been until this second. “I’m fine now, but how did you know?”

“It was strange.” Rage leaned his forehead on mine. “I was working with a freshman shifter, and then something overwhelmed me similar to panic. It came out of the blue, and when I glanced around, everyone was acting fine. That’s when I realized it had to be you, and now I smell him on you. What happened?”

“You were freaking out that much with our conversation?” Cole wrinkled his forehead and sighed.

“No, not everything is about you.” He had a habit of being self-centered from time to time.

“What?” He grabbed his chest, feigning fake horror. “That’s not true.”

“Shush.” Jess smacked him on the chest again and focused on me. “What the hell happened?”

“I had some free time today, so I decided to take a run in the woods. You know I’ve been avoiding the clearing after all that shit went down.” Rage had encouraged me not to go if I didn’t feel comfortable there. “Well, I was drawn to it today.”

“Drawn?” His jaw clenched.

“Yeah.” I probably sounded crazy. “So I went there. I waited at the entrance for a short time, making sure the place was safe. After a few minutes, I decided to go in. I found some beautiful irises there and went to smell them.”

“Did you say irises?” Jess tilted her head and frowned.

“Purple ones.” She was looking at me like I was crazy.

“Those aren’t blooming now.” Jess stood and bit her bottom lip. “Those are spring flowers, not fall.”

Well, I wasn’t quite sure what to tell her. The irises were definitely blooming. “There was some noise, a rustling where Damien used to shift for our training.”

“It had to be a wizard or maybe another fae.” Jess began pacing. “They had to be luring you with those flowers.”

“It worked.” Maybe I had been stupid, but hell, flowers do grow,

and they were pretty. “But you’re right. Professor Shaw was there.”

“And you were in your wolf form?” Rage pushed off the wall and ran a hand down his face.

“Yes, it was a one-sided conversation.” I filled them in on the rest of the discussion, leaving out his creepy advances on me. I wasn't willing to relive that.

“The only good thing out of this is Jordan getting in trouble.” Jess stood and headed into the kitchen. “She’s been a pain in my ass ever since my first day.”

“Yeah, but there is no telling what that actually means.” Jordan had been acting very strange the other day. “I hope she’s not in too much trouble.”

“Please, the girl couldn’t die. She’s too evil for that.” Cole shivered and rubbed his hands on his arm. “Even inside, she was frigid.”

“Dude, really?” Rage dropped his hands and looked at his friend. “Do we need to hear that?”

“Ha.” Cole laughed and slapped his leg with his hands. “I thought I was going to fall off in there.”

A cabinet slammed in the kitchen, and Jess stomped into the entryway to the room. “Are you being serious?”

“What?” Cole’s forehead creased, and he raised his hands.

“Oh, so we’re going to start talking about people we’ve slept with?” Jess had a glass in her hand, and she reared back.

I hoped she wouldn’t throw it. “He’s being an idiot. Calm down.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Cole stood and spread his hands apart. “I prefer to call it intellectually challenged.”

“See, sheer proof he’s an idiot.” Rage closed his eyes and shook his head.

“You don’t talk about people you’ve slept with in front of me. Got it.” Jess’s mouth dropped open. “It’s not cool.”

“Even if it’s bad?” Cole looked at Rage. “I thought it was fine if it wasn’t good sex.”

What’s crazy was that I was beginning to believe he thought that. “No, do you want to hear about Jess’s experience with someone she dumped?”

“Not exactly.” Cole paused and glanced at the ground. “I’m the best you’ve had, right?”

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” She smirked and flipped her ash blonde hair over her shoulder.

Rage shook his head and focused on me. “I’m not thrilled about this latest development.”

“Do you think I am?” It was frustrating. We had no control. Yet, Isadora expected us to go deeper. Find and identify the players.

“Look, I’m sorry.” Rage sighed.

At least he realized he was being unreasonable. However, it was hard to concentrate on that when Jess and Cole were giving each other faces. Apparently, Jess was still pissed over the Jordan sex comment. I glanced at Rage. “Let’s go check something.”

He must have gotten my hint because he nodded a little too eagerly.

“No, I’m in trouble.” Cole stared at me. “You can’t go. Seriously, don’t leave me.”

“It’s better to get this over with.” I headed toward my room with Rage on my trail.

I went past my bed, straight to the jewelry box that sat on my nightstand. It was one that I’d had for a while and was made of sturdy, solid wood.

“What’s wrong?” Rage’s tone was laced with worry.

“He said that he was able to use my necklace to locate me.” I should’ve known not to let Professor Shaw take it the night he helped me connect with my wolf. He’d said something about needing to check it for traces of magic, and I had foolishly believed him. Hindsight was always twenty-twenty. “Remember my old crescent moon necklace?”

“How could I forget it.” Rage frowned. That was the very thing that had kept us apart for so long and prevented me from being able to fully embrace my wolf. It had been as if my wolf and I were two separate entities living in one body. “I’m taking it that he didn’t offer to give it back.”

“Of course not.” I pulled out the necklace that Nate had used that night. Its silver wolf head caught the light. “If he can track me with my crescent necklace, can he somehow locate this one?”

“No, he can’t.” Rage touched my hand holding the necklace. “He’d need Nate since this was spelled just for him.”

At least that was one less thing to worry about.

“Hey, it’s going to be okay.” Rage stepped forward so we were only a breath apart. He took the pendant from my hand and laid it on the table. “We’ll get through this together.” He lowered his lips onto mine and wrapped his hands around my waist.

His taste was intoxicating. I could still taste a hint of his mint toothpaste. I opened my mouth, welcoming him in, and he groaned.

“You’re killing me.” He pulled me flush against him and nibbled on my neck. “I’d been so worried about you.” His hands slipped under my shirt, and his fingertips dug into my skin.

“I’m here now.” No matter how much I got of him, it wasn’t enough. I pushed him down on the bed and crawled on top of him.

He grabbed my waist and moved me so I was rubbing against him.

My senses were fast growing out of control. I rocked harder against

him, and his hands traveled up, yanking my shirt off. As he moved his hands back down my waist, he raised his hand and spanked me.

Like the other day, my breath caught. “Why’d you do that?”

“I smelled your arousal the other day.” He grabbed my waist and dug his fingers in ever so slightly. “Thought you might like it.”

“It’s not the worst thing you’ve ever done.” I leaned down, kissing him as he reached around me, yanking off my bra. These times were my favorite. When it felt like he and I were the only ones in the world.

Needing him, I lifted myself up and pointed at his pants. “Off, now.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He grinned as he quickly discarded the offending pants. “At your service.”

I lowered myself and enjoyed the ride. He rocked even harder into me.

The bond we shared peaked in these moments. That’s when we were connected both physically and emotionally. If we were part of the same pack, it would be better.

Within minutes, both of us climaxed, and I rolled over to my side.

He reached over and wrapped me in his arms. “I love you.”

“I love you too.” This was when I should have been my happiest. My true mate was beside me, we were engaged, and my time at the Academy should be wrapping up within the next year or two. However, there was a shadow hovering over it all, threatening to ruin everything. We had to figure out what was going on with The Elites or all of this—our happiness—might be ruined.

Chapter Four

The days began to blend together as I continuously checked every shadow that I passed. Professor Shaw had made it sound as if we would be needed soon. However, it'd been a week since he found me on my run.

"He's not the boogeyman." Jess touched my arm, startling me back to the present.

We were heading to our newly assigned class about understanding spells. It was a new class Isadora created at the academy, taught by a strong witch. Witches didn't attend Bloodshed Academy. They had their own exclusive school that specialized in all the things that witches needed to know. Witches had a lot to learn, and the type of training like Bloodshed did wasn't a necessity. Instead, they worked on spells and connections with nature. A good witch never had to physically fight one of us.

"I can't believe Isadora got this witch to teach here." Jess clapped her hands with excitement. "It'll help me as a fae."

The guys walked up behind us, whispering amongst themselves about some football game that had been on last night. They had a guys' night while Jess and I watched some movies and painted our nails.

Normally I wouldn't agree to have my nails painted since I tended to pick at the polish, but Jess pouted, and I wound up caving. It was different wearing pink on my nails, especially considering how it contrasted against my gray button-down and plaid skirt. I hated that we were required to wear uniforms here, but it had something to do with unity.

"It's going to be dangerous with all five of us in this class together." When Isadora texted Damien the other day, he informed us that everyone in our group had been signed up for this particular class.

We strolled into the main doorway of the brick building, and there were students sprinkled throughout the hallways. Each race had its own set of training and classes. Usually, the classes were generally the same for all of us with only the physical training being different.

This year, I was expected to partake in something of a culling if you will. I had to be ready to fight my way to the top or be forced from the school. Each year, the culling participants were essentially split in half. Half would go home; proven to not have the strength needed to lead, and the other half stayed to finish up their remaining classes.

Granted, my training hadn't been easy, but ultimately, this was what either made or broke us. That was one reason why there were so many whispers about the alpha that had run in the past. She had excelled but vanished shortly after the culling.

The guys had passed theirs when I first arrived here. They kind of kept mum about it, so it was apparent to me that wasn't a good sign. Usually, Bloodshed didn't hold on to students, but these three did have jobs that were outside of the normal student role. Cole with recruiting, Damien with training me, and Rage now helped with instructing the freshmen. Of course, Isadora valued them and their help. It was also another excuse to keep them here longer so we could get our foot into The Elites.

Damien had told me that I was scheduled to fight here pretty soon, but the date wasn't defined quite yet. Apparently, Jess had gone through the culling her first year at school, which was odd. Even though there was a handful of fae that attended here, her lineage had never attended Bloodshed, so she had to prove herself at the start. She hadn't won, but she wasn't one of the first to lose either and was able to stay.

"Where are we supposed to go again?" Jess turned around and walked backward so she kept her eyes on Damien.

"It's in the very back of the building." Damien pointed down the main hall. "On the right."

"Hey, watch it, fairy!" A girl snapped as Jess bumped into her.

"Bite me." Jess spun around so she was facing forward again but stopped short when she saw the other fae.

The girl wrinkled her nose. "Why am I not surprised you'd say that?" She glanced at the rest of us. "You hang out with shifters and vampires."

"Aw, your jealousy is showing." Jess placed a hand on her chest. "Oh my, it's not a good look on you."

I hated entitled assholes. "Are you sure there are any good looks for her?"

The girl huffed. "Did I give you the impression that I cared what you thought?"

"You know a little sweetness goes a long way." I hated how everyone here thought they couldn't be nice. Always believing it would make them look weak or disposable.

The guys stood behind us, watching the altercation. That was one of the many reasons why they were great—they didn't try to fight our battles for us.

"And why should I care about being nice to you?" She placed her hand on her hip, making her skirt bunch and her white button-down wrinkle. Her hair was silver, and it reflected light from every angle.

If she wasn't frowning and wrinkling her nose, she would be pretty. "You never know when you might need help."

"Let's be clear." She took a step toward me and pointed her finger in my face. "I'd never want help from you."

"Well, let me be clear." This bitch needed to be taken down a few notches. "If you don't get that finger out of my face, I'll make you." A loud growl emanated from my throat.

"Try me." She shook her head as if spurring me to bring it.

She obviously didn't think I would.

I moved fast, grabbed her finger, and turned my hand so her wrist was bent back with a ton of pressure. "This wasn't anything. See what happens if you do it again."

Her teal eyes sparked, and a small grin slid across her face.

"Oh, no you don't." Jess raised her hand and smacked away a chair that had been floating in the air toward us.

The fae's grin quickly turned into a frown. "You're going to pay for that, Jess."

The fact that she knew Jess's name threw me. I had no clue who this girl was.

"I should've known it was you, Kim." Jess rolled her eyes and took a step toward her. "And here I thought you couldn't cut it and had to leave the academy."

"Of course not. My parents and grandparents and their grandparents and on and on attended here. I have the right to be here, unlike you." She lifted her chin. "I made sure I kept my distance from you with all the other fae and supernaturals. That, and I didn't make your group the center of the universe. In fact, I'm pretty sure I'll be fighting your friend in the culling."

When Jess didn't snap back, it caught me off guard. She looked concerned. "I hate that for you." I'd be damned if I let her get the last laugh. "I can't wait to wipe that smug smile off your face. After all, I've never even heard of your name before, so you can't be that strong."

The smug look vanished from Kim's face. "That doesn't mean anything."

"Oh, but it does." To be fair, I didn't know any other fae's name except Jess's. Not that it was intentional. It's just that life was crazy, and we had kept to our tight group. Other than classes, I hadn't been able to meet many others. "Have you heard of us? I mean, I've never introduced myself to you."

"Neither have I." Cole had to pipe in. "Which makes her point stronger. You don't look like the type who tries to blend in."

"What does that mean?" Her mouth dropped open, and she reminded me of a fish.

“It means you’re the type of girl who tries to get noticed, but there isn’t anything special about you.” Cole stepped next to Jess protectively. “Your skirt is two inches higher than either of these ladies’. Your makeup is done too heavily despite you trying to make it look natural, and you haven’t buttoned the top two buttons on your shirt.”

Kim stomped her foot on the ground and took several quick breaths. It seemed as though she was going to spontaneously combust.

“And this proves you can’t recover.” Cole waved his hand. “So please leave us alone and take your overly fragrant rose ass away from us. We’re going to be late for class.”

Not bothering to wait for a response, Cole turned his back on her and looked at Jess. “Let’s go. I don’t want her to be the reason we’re late.” The two of them hurried off, leaving us behind.

Rage grabbed my hand and tugged forward as well. “Come on, babe. Don’t waste any more time on her.”

It was true, I shouldn’t. Normally I wouldn't have a problem, but the effect she had on Jess bothered me. “You’re right.” I turned my back on her and followed the others.

“I swear girls are drama,” Damien whispered under his breath.

“But your life wouldn’t be complete without me and Jess.” I turned toward him and arched an eyebrow.

“In all honesty, it’s about the same as before you came. Cole creates his own drama if things get too boring.”

“That’s actually accurate.” Rage chuckled. “One night I had to hold his hair while he puked.”

“What?” That didn’t make sense. Sure, Cole’s hair was longer than the other guys’, but not by much. He spiked up the front. “Why?”

“Oh, our first year here, he had the shaggy, in-your-eyes look.” Damien's face lit up. “So when he puked, the side pieces would get in his mouth.”

“What about a ponytail holder?” The one time I had drunk too much, that’s what I’d used.

“We’re guys.” Damien lifted both hands. “We don’t have ponytail holders.”

“Wait … I thought vampires couldn’t get drunk.” It was hard for shifters unless there was some Wolfsbane added to it.

“They can if they drink from an inebriated person. Unfortunately, he chose a witch who took some herbs to make the effects stronger. That’s why vampires don’t normally associate with witches. They can’t be trusted.” Rage pulled at the collar of his polo. “That night was living hell.”

As we turned the corner for the classroom, Jess and Cole stopped and waited for us before going in.

“Is everything okay?” I figured they would already be inside, claiming our seats.

Cole took a few steps in our direction and spoke softly. “I’m not going in there to face a witch, at least not without all of you backing me up.”

It took everything I had not to burst out laughing. The timing of the guys’ story and Cole’s reaction was priceless.

“You’re so dramatic.” Jess shook her head and seemed to be acting like herself again.

Though she appeared fine now, she hadn’t a few minutes ago. She had some explaining to do later. “Are you fine to go in now?”

“Yup.” Cole turned on his heels and headed into the classroom. “We’ve got this.”

“I swear.” Jess sighed and followed him into the room. “Sometimes I get whiplash with him.”

“But at least it’s never boring.” That was one word you could never use to describe Cole.

“Yeah, but it would be nice to call him that from time to time.” Damien stepped through the door.

The room was a standard classroom; however, the woman at the front of the room was not. She was wearing a dark black dress which didn’t surprise me, but her hair was dark brown and in two long braids on either side of her face. Her eyes were striking since they were different colors; one blue and one green. She had to be in her early thirties, but with witches, you could never tell for sure.

“Hello, I see all of you came in together and at one time too.” She tilted her head and glanced at me. “You must be Raven.”

“Yes, I am.” That was a little unsettling. How did she know my name?

“It seems a lot of things began happening when you came to school here.” Her eyes traveled to mine and Rage’s joined hands and then rose to his face. “And her true mate, Rage.”

“As exhilarating as this is, we get the point. You already know who we are.” Cole pointed with his pointer fingers and lifted his thumbs in the air pretending to shoot her.

“Isadora was right. It didn’t take long at all before you mouthed off.” The witch rolled her eyes and laughed. “So, let's begin class.”

“Aren’t we going to wait for everyone else?” It was nice that she was eager to begin, but wasn’t it too early to start, especially with the five of us.

“Everyone is here.” She walked up to the podium at the side of the room and stood.

“I guess taking seats in the back isn't an option.” Cole crossed his fingers.

“Sit wherever you want.” She narrowed her eyes at him. “I’ll rearrange things the way I need, to ensure you’re riveted and attentive.”

“Just come on.” Damien moved first and plopped down at a desk in the front row.

Rage and I followed suit. I sat on the other side of Rage, leaving a seat open for Jess.

“We have nothing to lose.” Jess bounced and took the seat next to me.

“Fine.” Within moments, Cole sat next to Jess. “Let’s see what you’ve got.”

“So this is a special class. One that I’ll never offer to do again. But given the circumstances, you all are important to Isadora and my mission.” She glanced at Jess. “Can you please shut the door?”

“Oh ... Sure.” Jess turned around, lifted her hand in the air, and made a shutting motion.

The door slammed shut.

“Thank you.” She closed her eyes and mumbled words in another language. “The room has been spelled. No one can hear anything that’s said in here. This is a safe place.”

“It might be nice if we learned your name.” Rage leaned back in his seat.

“Aw, no need.” Cole sulked. “Witch works perfectly for me.”

“The name you’ll know me by is Luna.” She lifted her arms, which accentuated her size. She wasn’t a large woman by any means, but she was thicker and had curves in all the right places.

“Now, the point of teaching you is not for me to let our secrets out.” She glared at us each in turn. “But to help you specifically with infiltrating The Elites. Do you understand?”

Damn, I wasn’t expecting that. “Yeah, but I wonder—why didn’t Isadora give us a warning about this?”

“Why don’t you give her a call?” Luna waved us on.

“We’ll do just that.” Cole pulled out his cell phone and dialed Isadora’s number. Before he pressed send, Luna grabbed it from Cole and mumbled some words.

“Okay, here you go. I removed the enchantment from your phone.” She hit send as she handed it back to him.

It began ringing as he turned it on speaker.

“Hello, Mr. Smith.” Isadora sounded as if she had expected this. “I take it you wish to confirm that Luna is on our side.”

“Nope, I wanted to hear you sing to me.” Cole pretended to cry. “It’s been too long since you’ve sung anything to me.”

“Yes, he was calling to get you to vouch for me.” Luna grinned and shook her head at Cole.

“I’m sorry, I should’ve told them earlier.” She sighed and cleared her throat. “But when Damien told me that Raven had a run-in with Jonathan, I decided we needed to bring in reinforcements. I’ve been bogged down, making sure the mermaid was well hidden. Her need for water narrowed down the spots we could place her.”

“Thank you for assuring them.” Luna bowed her head. “Now, Cole, please turn your phone off for the rest of the duration of the class.”

“Yes, make sure they’re prepared.” Isadora hung up the phone on her end.

“Now we begin.” Luna went back to the podium. “We must start with a binding spell. No secrets may leave this room.”

Out of all the things to happen today, this wasn’t something I had expected. It made me nervous, wondering what stake Luna had in this whole thing. I hoped we weren’t trusting the wrong people.

Chapter Five

The class was near ending for the day, and my mind was blown. I'd always known that witches had magic inside of them. However, the fact that the help of herbs and incense made their spells stronger and some rituals couldn't be done without the extra ingredients blew my mind.

She hadn't gone through any of the details yet, just a high level, overall view about the way witches live. There had always been a divide between witches and other supernaturals since they schooled completely separate from us.

"Now, I won't be teaching you all of the details as you aren't witches." Luna stood in front of me and lifted her hands together as if she was about to pray. "But I'm here to give you the bare essentials because of the wizard." She almost spat the last word out.

Wizards associated themselves with fae more than witches, which pissed them off. At the end of the day, they were the male version of a witch. From my understanding, wizards had wanted to attend Bloodshed to prove they were as tough as the rest of us supernaturals. Egos were a bitch sometimes.

"Oh, please." Cole grinned and placed his head in his hands. "Tell us how you really feel."

"You are a smartass." Luna stood ram-rod straight and looked down her nose at him. "You will respect me."

"Sweetheart, you can't demand …" His words cut off as he grabbed his head in pain. "Holy shit."

"I will not tolerate this." Her voice deepened, and her eyes began to glow. It made them more beautiful in a haunting way. "This isn't an opportunity for all eyes to be on you. This is for learning so that all of our kinds are safe and not overtaken by racism. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Yes, I do." Cole groaned out the words, and his fingers dug into his head.

"Good." She nodded, and Cole took in a deep breath.

"Damn, you're amazing." Cole leaned back in his seat and sighed. "I may have to bow down to you."

"Of course, pain is what makes Cole respect you." Damien shook his head and frowned.

"Please, don't bow." She startled and took a few steps back. "We need everyone to be serious here."

"So why are you so invested in the cause?" I still didn't have warm and fuzzies about her. There was no direct reason why she'd be on our side, believing in the cause. "How do we know you aren't part of the

society?"

"Didn't you hear Isadora vouch for me?" A small smile played at the corners of her lips.

"That's not good enough for me." There were too many hands in the pot, and I'd bet I didn't want to know how many there were. I had a feeling that the society wasn't a small group but one that had been around for years. It was going to take a long time to truly dismantle and take down The Elite. That's why I was focusing on freeing the Academy as the first step.

"A smart girl." She licked her lips and stared me down. "My sister was half witch. My mother had an affair with a vampire shortly after my dad died. We kept the secret locked down tight. She was able to perform magic like the rest of us. A few people were brave enough to ask questions, but my mother was the priestess, so she'd shut them down."

I had a feeling I already knew where the story was leading.

"One night, she and I decided to run into town and pick up some herbs. We had this special spell we wanted to try. While in the store, my sister told me she was going down another aisle. I never thought a second about it." She frowned, and unshed tears glistened in her eyes. "I heard her talking to someone, so I knew she was close by. A few moments later, the door to the shop dinged, and then I heard a loud cry. She was calling for me."

"Oh, God." Jess murmured the words and placed her hand on her heart. "No."

"By the time I got outside, she was gone. They had kidnapped her after luring her outside."

That was exactly how the society worked. I'd witnessed it several times now.

"How do you know it was them?" Rage was now on the same page with me, which didn't surprise me at all.

"At first, I didn't." Luna began pacing and rubbing her arms. "But I was able to sense her by one of her spell books at home. She flipped through it all the time. So I tracked her down to an abandoned warehouse. By the time I got there, she was gone. It was north of the city, and I found a blood trail that spelled out The Elites. Ever since then, I promised I'd find her."

"Why can't you trace her now?" Damien tapped his fingers on his desk, an action that emphasized his huge muscles.

"I don't know." She stopped her pacing and stared at the wall. "It is like she was gone, but Mother still feels her. Since she's part of our coven, Mother can feel all of our heartbeats. We can't communicate as a pack does, but we know when a new member is born or if one of us dies."

“Could they somehow remove someone’s power?” Jess bit on her lip and began tapping her foot. “Somehow cloak their magic?”

“That’s what I think has happened as well.” Luna nodded and gave her a sad smile. “The only thing that makes sense is that they’ve used black magic to do it. At least to her.”

“So you want us to find her.” That was the obvious explanation for me.

“Yes and no.” Luna took a few steps toward me. “I do want to find her, but we need to take the society down as well. This is a large organization, beyond comprehension. No one, not even my sister will be safe unless they’re gone … for good.”

“Hell, yeah.” Cole raised his fist in the air. “We’ve got this.”

Suddenly, a cell phone rang, releasing the tension in the room. It rang again before Luna came back to the present. “Oh, that’s the alarm on my phone. It must be time to end.” She hurried over to it and turned it off.

Everything in her story touched my heart. Her sincerity had me believing her words. She was with us here, risking centuries of witch secrets just to find her sister.

AS WE HEADED BACK to our dorm, I couldn’t stop thinking about Luna’s story. There were probably many variations of the same thing. It was scary.

“The way she didn’t have to move a muscle was fucking amazing. It was as if my head was imploding.” Cole was still going on about it. “How come I can’t do something similar to that?”

“Yes, you’re super speed and strength aren’t something you should be proud of at all.” Jess rolled her eyes. “We all have our skill set.”

“Yeah, but I’ve never been mentally attacked by a witch before.” Cole pounded on his chest. “And let me tell you, they are more amazing than I ever expected.”

The one great thing about Cole was that he didn’t care what race you were as long as you were honest, cool, and kept him intrigued. “I wonder what else she has up her sleeves.” I bumped into Rage’s arm and winked.

“Maybe next time, we can ask her to turn him into a frog.” Rage waggled his eyebrows at me.

“No, that’s too nice.” Damien grinned as he caught up next to me. “How about a rat?”

“Ooh, I almost think an ass.” Jess glanced over her shoulder to catch our eyes.

“What? You want me to be two ass cheeks?” Cole stopped, practically making the rest of us run into his back. “You would miss

this cute face."

"No, I meant a donkey." Jess raised both hands and shook her head. "Sometimes I worry about you."

"I'll tell you what I would want to be." Cole grinned and spun around to face us. "I'd want to be a sloth."

"What?" Damien's forehead creased, and he shook his head. "They're slow."

"Right, but amazing in water." Cole lifted two fingers. "And they tend to hang out in trees, which, I mean, who wouldn't want to do that? Thirdly, they poop once a week if that."

"You've actually put thought into this." Rage wrapped his arm around me and pulled me close. He whispered in my ear. "I'm slightly afraid now. Out of all the things he could think through, that was what he chose."

I couldn't help the giggle that escaped. "Hey, he may believe in reincarnation."

"Don't hate." Cole began bouncing his way back to the dorms.

Within the next few minutes, we all marched through my door. Now that we were somewhere safe, all of our moods changed.

Rage and I sat on the couch, and everyone else filled in the other seats. I was surprised when Cole came to sit on the other side of me. Jess and Damien took the single chairs on the side.

"Let me start by saying Luna may be a goddess." Cole rubbed his eyes and sighed. "The pain was so real and intense, I think I may have pooped my pants."

"Well, you always smell like shit, so I can't tell from here." Rage leaned over me so he could look at Cole. "Maybe you should start taking baths more regularly."

"You know I don't shift into a beast and therefore don't get super dirty." Cole narrowed his eyes. "I mean I don't get poop stuck to my ass fur, so I think taking a bath every other day is safe."

"First off, does anyone believe her story?" Damien ran his hand through his hair.

"I do." There was something about it. "She teared up."

"She could be a good actress." Damien shrugged as he shifted in the seat. "I'd hate to trust her and be wrong."

"We don't have any choice though." At the end of the day, she was here, and we were stuck with her. "Isadora brought her in. Don't you trust her?" Damien always took his time to warm up to someone. The main reason I got through to him as fast as I did was because he was my personal trainer. I made that comment to Rage the other day, and he agreed.

"I don't trust that hag." Jess crossed her arms and leaned back into the seat. "I mean every time you guys have a meeting with her, it's so

secretive. Something has to be up."

Her comment didn't surprise me. It always bothered Jess to be left out, but to her credit, this was the first sign I ever had. "True, but still, you can't go talking to just anyone about a secret society that's lying about half-breeds. The reason I got included in this was she found out about my letter."

Her face relaxed a little and lost some of the frown. "I get it, but she should know we're all in this together."

"Don't worry, babe." Cole hit his hand against his chest. "I've got you."

"I agree with Raven." Rage glanced around the group. "It wasn't fake. Her heart matched the tone. If she was lying, it would have sped up more."

"That logic I can agree with." Damien sighed as his leg bounced. "It's hard to trust someone. Especially since she was forced on us."

"But she knows the magic already." Jess pushed her hair behind her ears. "We already know that wherever these people are hiding, it's masked by their magic."

"Or neutralizing it." It sounded like something they would do. "But why would they keep the hybrids around?"

"Maybe they have a slight ethics code?" Jess shrugged and tapped her lips. "They can't kill just to kill."

"That's not true." The memory flashed again through my mind. "They killed that half-breed and staged it. They did it to get us working to help them."

"Casualties of war." Rage huffed. "But if they killed them all, it would be hard to get rid of the bodies."

"Maybe, but it can't be easy having that many people still alive and being held captive somewhere." Damien frowned. "And you'd think we'd know all about it."

"Might be good test subjects." Cole shrugged. "I mean, you get a two for one reaction."

"Maybe." Damien stared off into space.

There were so many possibilities for why. We could sit here all night and possibly not get close to the real reason. "We need more information before we can solve this."

My phone went off in my pocket. I wondered if it was my parents again. Ever since they found out we were getting married in two months, mom had been texting more. From what Rage had told me, Audrey and mom were talking pretty regularly again. Once upon a time, I'd have been ecstatic over it, but not now.

Digging it out from my back pocket, I glanced at the screen. It was a text from an unknown number.

I told you I'd be bothering you. Tonight, we have a mission. You and

Rage meet me at the bowling alley at 7. See you soon, dear.

My stomach dropped. I didn't need to say anything because Rage's quick intake of breath proved he'd read the message.

"Shit, I was hoping we would have longer than this." Rage growled under his breath.

"Hot damn, we got some kidnapping to do tonight." Cole clapped his hands. "It's never boring around here."

I wished I had his enthusiasm. I glanced at Damien and Jess, who looked as if they were trying to decide whether Cole was being serious. "Yeah, we have a mission tonight." That meant we were going to have to kidnap a kid.

"You better make sure you're on your game." Damien stood and stretched his arms. "After what happened with Nate, all eyes are going to be on you."

That was an understatement. It wouldn't take much for them to take their eyes off Jordan and begin to suspect us. "Yay."

"It'll be fine." Jess winked at me. "You've got this."

"I don't know if I can do it." Yes, I knew this was going to happen eventually. Though now that it was here, it was different.

"You're going to have to." Damien took on his instructor tone with me. "You've got to remember it's about the bigger game."

"But this kid." They were either young teenagers or kids my age. They hadn't gotten to live before they were kidnapped and taken away to God knows where, forced to do God knows what.

"If you don't do this, we won't get to save all the others that have been taken." Rage gently placed his fingers under my chin and turned it toward his face. "I'll be beside you. We will find them again, all of them."

He was right, but this felt wrong. "I know, but we're turning an innocent over … to them."

"Maybe we can put a tracker on this one." Cole jumped to his feet and looked around. "That way, we can bust them out tonight."

"Didn't you hear what Luna said?" Damien fidgeted again like he couldn't get comfortable. "She tracked her sister to an abandoned warehouse."

"Yeah, so?" Cole shrugged and pursed his lips.

"They take them somewhere first to probably strip them of all their electronics or anything else that could be tracked." Damien shifted again and finally stood.

"So if we put a tracker on the target, they could potentially link it to us since the target shouldn't be suspicious." Rage sighed and dropped his hands to his legs. "There is nothing we can do."

"We could follow him." Cole lifted his hands.

"No." Damien shook his head. "We can't risk getting caught,

because it'd be tied back to Raven and Rage. Rage is right. Our hands are tied."

I glanced at the clock. It was three. In four hours, I'd have to show up at the bowling alley as if nothing was bothering me and I believed in their cause. I wasn't sure I had it in me.

Chapter Six

We pulled up to Rock and Bowl at seven. The outside looked like an older, quaint building, but there was a large group of people heading in. Rage parked Cole's car in the back lot where there were a few spots left.

Loud rock music blared from the building. It already hurt my ears, and I wasn't halfway inside. This was going to be fun. I'd take the skating rink over this.

"So where do we meet him?" Rage glanced around with a grimace on his face. "Maybe we won't have to go in."

Shifters didn't mind loud music most of the time. Although when it reached a certain decibel, it was hard to take. I pulled out a pair of earplugs for both him and me. I'd investigated the bowling alley before leaving and saw that they had live bands here. I figured we should have them in case.

"I love you." He grabbed a pair and popped them into his ears.

"You better be glad I thought ahead." I hated wearing these damn things, but sometimes they were essential. We could still hear around the barrier, but it helped a little. "Actually, I have no clue where he's going to be."

"Looking for me?" Professor Shaw appeared as if he came out of thin air.

"Obviously you heard us." It wasn't surprising that he thought we were that stupid.

"Touche." A small smile flitted across his mouth. "Well, this is who we're looking for." He held up a picture. It was another guy our age. He was very handsome as were most supernaturals. His eyes almost looked opal colored. They appeared to change colors while I was just looking at the photo.

"What is he?" Obviously, he was a combination of things, but I couldn't piece together which two.

"He's a phoenix shifter and wizard." Professor Shaw lowered the picture and placed it in his back pocket.

"What?" Rage blinked a few times. "Phoenix shifters can't live outside the fae world."

"Apparently, they can when they're a mix." Professor Shaw took a deep breath. "All right, go in and get him. Do whatever you need to get him outside. I'll be ready to take him."

"Shouldn't one of us go with you?" Maybe we could at least see where they were initially holding them. Luna had said she kept an eye on the warehouse, and they'd never returned.

“Don’t get ahead of yourself.” Professor Shaw tilted his head and licked his lips as he examined me. “I think you’re solid, but you haven’t proven your worth to the ones who matter. So, I’ll be handling the guy alone. Got it?”

“But …”

“We got it.” Rage took my hand and tugged me toward the building. “We shouldn’t be long.”

When we were several yards away, I couldn’t stop myself. “What the hell was that?”

“Was what?” Rage shrugged and kept moving.

“You know what.” I couldn't believe he was doing the typical guy shit. “You totally cut me off back there.” I was so mad that I didn’t see the people standing around us.

“Stop making a scene.” Rage narrowed his eyes at me and did his low raspy voice he did when he got angry. “You aren’t going to gain Shaw’s trust if you keep pushing to go with him. So calm down.”

Telling a lady to calm down wasn’t a very smart thing to do. “And I used to think you were smarter than Cole.”

That made him stop in his tracks. “Let’s get this done.”

For the first time ever, I wanted to throw a temper tantrum and tell him what I really thought at the moment, but unfortunately, he was right. We had a mission, and if we didn’t succeed, we might not ever figure out what was going on and how to find all of the hybrids that had already been taken.

The music stopped, so I decided not to acknowledge his comment verbally. I marched off and squeezed through a group standing on the front porch. I needed to make my way in.

“Hey there, hottie.” A hand grabbed my ass, and the stench of alcohol burned my nose.

I reached down and grabbed the hand, turning it so I was putting tremendous pressure on the wrist. “Don’t touch me again.”

“Feisty.” Another guy chuckled and closed in on my other side. “She might need two of us to tame her.”

Ew. This felt too familiar as if slime was covering my body now. It reminded me of when Greg and Shaw touched me. “If you don’t back away, I’ll make you.”

“Ha, what can a girl like you actually do?” The guy who had copped a feel somehow got closer.

Without a second thought, I reared back and punched the guy in the nose, causing it to make a sickening crack.

“How’d you ...” The other guy began to say when he was yanked back by Rage.

He held the guy in the air by his throat. “You touch her again, and you’re dead. Don’t look in her direction.”

Normally, I'd be thankful that Rage had helped out, but tonight I was straight-up annoyed. I was handling it fine by myself.

"Were they harassing someone else?" The exact guy we needed stepped out from the doorway. "I told them to leave and not make any more scenes."

"Well, they didn't listen." Rage growled, letting his wolf slip forward a little more than needed in the presence of humans.

"We were going." The guy who was still hanging in the air gargled out. "We were just teasing her. We didn't mean to cause any harm."

"If you aren't out of here by the next minute, then you'll be regretting your decision." The half-breed narrowed his eyes at them.

The guy I punched stood slowly and groaned, blood still pouring through his nose. "She fucking broke my nose."

"You're welcome. It could've been a whole lot worse." I had wanted to strangle the asshole. A nice shower when I got home was a requirement.

"You b …"

"Be careful what you call me." This guy was a pig. "Next time, I won't be so nice, and I'll aim for your balls … if you have any."

"The minute has started." The half-breed yelled even though there was a slight laugh in his voice.

Rage dropped the guy, making him fall and land on his knees.

He jumped to his feet and grabbed his friend with the bleeding nose. "We're out of here."

The three of us watched the assholes scramble for their car.

"Is it safe for them to drive?" To be honest, I didn't care what happened to humans like them. Still, I was curious.

"Nope." The half-breed said next to us. "Maybe that's a good thing. This isn't the first night they've grabbed a woman inappropriately."

"Do you work here?" For some reason, I had expected him to be hanging out here.

"Yeah, I sure do." He glanced at me and smiled. "I figured I could use my magic for dealing with assholes."

"Well, if they think about touching my mate again, I'll rip their heads off." Rage's breathing was still rapid.

Even though I was mad at him, I'd be as upset as him if the shoe was on the other foot. "It's fine. They're gone, and nothing happened."

"Uh … Mate?" The newbie raised an eyebrow. "Do you mean wife?" He glanced at my finger where the rock Rage had given me sat.

"Nope, my mate and future bride." Rage's chocolate eyes landed on me.

"It's a wolf thing." I said it casually, hoping to catch the guy off guard, and it worked.

"Wolf?" Instead of disbelief, I heard hope. "Do you mean you can

turn into a wolf?"

"Yeah, we shift into them." I turned my head to the side. "You smell paranormal too."

"This is going to sound crazy, but the other day I shifted into a fiery animal." He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. "I didn't know what to do."

"Where are your parents?" Every time we found a hybrid, their parents weren't around. No wonder these kids lost control if no one taught them.

"No idea. I got dropped off at the hospital the night I was born." He shrugged. "I had a nice life when I got adopted by my real parents. But when I told them about what happened, they looked at me as if I grew another head."

"You are half phoenix and," Rage said as he sniffed him, "wizard."

"This has to be a dream." The kid shook his head and glanced back inside the building. "That stuff can't be real."

"Hey, Eric. Are you coming back in to finish your shift?" A young guy popped his head out of the door and stared at his friend.

"He was helping me out when some guys groped my girl." Rage called back to the guy answering for our friend, Eric.

"Oh, dude." The kid shook his head and frowned. "They're getting worse. We're going to have to ban them."

"Yeah, next time, we won't let them through the door." Eric nodded at his friend and turned to us. "I don't want to go back in. I think that you both may have some answers I need, and it's my chance to learn something about myself."

"Why don't you see if that guy is willing to cover for you?" Rage took the initiative for the kidnapping. "Tell him we want to go file a police report or something."

I was grateful for him taking the lead. I wasn't sure if I'd have been able to do it.

"That sounds good. Let me go talk to him for a second. I'll be right back." Eric ran back inside, leaving Rage and me alone in front of the building.

Apparently, during the scuffle, the rest of the people had gone inside.

"Look, I'm sorry." Rage let out a breath and reached for my hand. "I wasn't trying to be overbearing."

"He said yeah." Eric jumped down the few stairs and caught up with us. "Where are we heading?"

Rage motioned for him to follow. "We have someone picking us up."

"Oh, sweet." Eric rushed to catch up ready for answers.

A black car similar to the one Ian had driven pulled up. Professor

Shaw rolled down the driver's side window. "Hello. Are you ready to go?"

"Heck yeah." Eric grabbed the driver's side rear door and jumped in. He held it open for us to get in after him.

"Oh, crap." Rage grabbed my hand and motioned to the other side of the building. "Hold on, we forgot something. I need you to help me find my wallet." Rage grimaced as he told the lie. "Give us a second." Rage slammed the door shut, and the car took off immediately.

A loud scream echoed back to us, and we could hear it through the earplugs.

THE CAR RIDE back to the Academy was silent. Rage had apologized, but it had been interrupted, and I needed more time. We had tricked an innocent person, who thought we were going to give him answers, and let him get taken instead. It was a hard pill to swallow.

When our lights hit Tulane University's sign, I took a deep breath. We were almost home. The academy was attached to Tulane but was in the very back. It was spelled so no human would attempt to go back there. That's how Bloodshed remained human free.

Rage pulled into Cole's normal spot and turned off the car.

I opened the door, but Rage reached over and grabbed my arm. "Can we talk for a minute?"

If we went inside, we wouldn't be alone, so this was the best time to get past our differences. I loved him, but tonight was hard on me. "Look, I get that I shouldn't have tried pushing Shaw, but it killed me to do that tonight."

"I know, and ..." Rage stared out the windshield and groaned. "It wasn't easy for me either. But I did it so you wouldn't beat yourself up more."

Of course, he did. He always thought of my needs before his own. "I should've realized it."

"No, no, you shouldn't." He huffed and turned his face toward me. "Raven, in our group, you're the heart. Yeah, Cole, Damien, and I were friends before you, but not like now. You've somehow come into our group and made us whole. We hadn't noticed we were missing Jess. I couldn't risk you, so I'll take the blame."

Now I was being an ass. "I'm sorry too. I lashed out at you because I was struggling. I should've known you were too." I bit my lip. "You were trying to protect us … protect me."

"I'm not sure I'm ready to go face them." Rage glanced into the sky, staring at the half-moon.

It was funny because I felt the same way. They'd want to ask questions, to know what happened. I would do the same thing if I

were in their shoes, but it wouldn't hurt to have a moment of peace before reliving the memory. "Did we do the right thing?"

He reached over and took my hand. "To be honest, no. But I don't think there is a right answer here."

I understood where he was heading. "Because if we hadn't, then we risk God knows how many others."

"Yeah." Rage squeezed my hand as he laid his head back on the seat. "I think, based on all the information we know, we made the best call out of all the alternatives."

"But he's going to hate us." His face will always haunt me the same way the others we had so-called helped. At least, with the others, I had actually thought we were saving them.

"Probably." Rage nodded and turned his head so he was looking at me. "But when we save them, maybe he'll forgive us."

"That's what bothers me the most." It's the fear I'd been afraid to admit. "What if we help them find more and we don't learn anything. So all we did is help them with this mission, their cause."

"It's something that worries me too." He gave me a sad smile. "But then, if we didn't do anything, we'd have the regret of *what if*."

"In other words, we choose the *what if* that we can best live with." It sounded selfish when I put it that way.

"At least with this option, we have a *what if* we can save them." Rage reached over and tapped the end of my nose.

For the first time tonight, I enjoyed the way that sounded. "I hope that's what happens."

"Me too." He leaned forward in his seat and let go of my hand. "We probably need to head in. We don't want to worry them."

"Knowing Cole, he'd be calling the cops, giving them our descriptions." Honestly, I doubted he'd ever do that, but it did sound like something he would do if we were human.

"Let's pray that never happens." Rage opened the car door and climbed out.

As I reached for mine, my phone went off. The screen lit up, letting me see Professor Shaw's message.

You both did well tonight. Talk soon.

My stomach sank once more.

Chapter Seven

The next few days seemed to pass in a blur. Jess and I were planning my wedding. Really, she was doing most of it. She was so excited and doing an amazing job. With everything else going on, I had a hard time concentrating on it. It wasn't that I didn't want to marry Rage, but more pressing matters were at hand.

"So, I'm thinking we go with Academy themed colors." Jess flipped through some Pinterest images at the kitchen table and waved me over.

"Give me a second." I needed a fresh cup of coffee if I was going to try to be attentive. Nightmares had been plaguing me of late. I had slept through breakfast and still felt exhausted.

"Rage said you struggled with sleeping again last night." Jess turned her head in my direction. "What's haunting you?"

"You can't give it a guess?" The words snapped out of me before I could stop them.

She tilted her head at me and pursed her lips. "I kind of deserved that, but it better not happen again."

I shouldn't have taken my aggravation out on her. "Sorry, it's just …"

"No, I get it. You're capturing people who you know are being abused, and your parents lied to you all your life." She frowned and tapped her fingers on the table. "But the thing is you can't change any of it. Instead, let's focus on the good stuff, and one of the best things you have is a true mate who is excited to marry your ass."

"You're right." Somebody needed to smack some sense into me. "I'm being ungrateful."

"Hey, you've had a lot thrown at you." Jess stood and came over to me, wrapping her arms around me. "But what I do know is we are going to make a difference."

Motivating words were what I needed. "It's just that there are so many alternate scenarios."

"But we've got this, girl." She leaned back and grabbed my coffee mug from the Keurig and handed it to me. "Okay, let's get you caffeinated so no more snap comes from that trap."

I grabbed the mug, letting the warmth spread throughout my hands. "Let's look at what you've got."

It didn't take long before we agreed on a color scheme. I didn't want Bloodshed to define everything in my life, so we decided to go with blue-gray and white. The color would compliment Jess's skin tone and would look good with the suits.

As soon as we were finished, Rage came through the door.

His brow arched. “What are you two up to?”

“Planning the wedding of the year.” Jess clapped her hands and glanced at me. “Tell Rage what you were thinking color-wise.”

A huge grin spread across his face. “You were part of the planning this time?”

Even though he didn’t mean for it to, it sunk in how out of touch I had been. I had a man who I was already mated to but still wanted to keep with tradition and celebrate our union with our families. Here I was, worrying about everything but him. This meant a lot to him. “Yup. So I hope you’re okay with blue-gray and white.”

“My favorite colors.” He crossed the room and wrapped me in his arms.

“Really?” How did I not know this?

“Well, they are now.” Rage leaned down and kissed my lips.

“That’s super cheesy.” Jess groaned as she picked up a piece of paper and threw it at us. “Get a room.”

“Don’t be jealous.” Rage glanced her way. “Cole will be here soon.”

“I’m tickled that we’re getting it all together. Hell, it’s the end of October already. December tenth will be here quickly.” Jess grabbed her iPad and began working again. “Now, I can order the invitations. Your mom has requested it be at Rage’s home. Does that work for you?”

There was no way I’d get my parents to come down here, and I couldn’t go back to Clarksville. “Are we sure it’s okay with Rage’s parents since he left the pack?”

“Just because I left doesn’t mean I won’t go home to visit.” Rage brushed my cheek with his thumb. “Mom’s been begging to have it there.”

“Well then, it’s done.” The area was beautiful around their home. It was next to Oak Mountain State Park. It felt good to think about something different.

“Great, I’ll call her.” Rage kissed my lips once more. “I’ll be right back.” He walked into the den and took out his phone. He pushed some buttons and held the phone to his ear. “I’m going to step into your room.”

I gave him a thumbs-up, and he headed down the hallway.

“You’ve made his day.” Jess turned her eyes back to her iPad. “Those details have been up in the air for weeks, and you nailed it all down in twenty minutes.”

“Let me know the next things I need to do.” Now that I thought about it, there was a lot to do. “Wait, don’t we need to figure out my dress and your bride’s maid dress?”

“Girl, I’ve gotten that all taken care of.” She waved me off as if I was a nuisance.

“When do I need to pay for it?” I didn’t want to ask my parents for money, so I was going to have to get a job.

“Already taken care of.” She didn’t bother glancing in my direction.

“By who?” This stuff wasn’t free.

“Your parents.” Jess hit her iPad with gusto and laid it on the table. “And your invitations are ordered.”

“But they can’t afford …” Wait, they did both go to school here. Was that another thing they had kept from me?

“Figured it out, huh?” Jess’s grin disappeared. “I’m sorry.”

“No, it’s fine.” Yeah, the hole between my parents and me grew a little deeper. Still, at least it wasn’t the same as when I found out they had suppressed my wolf.

Three short raps sounded on the door. “Guess who’s here?”

“Do you think they don’t know?” Damien’s bored voice reached us through the door.

“Oh, stop.” Cole moved around and there was a loud smack like he had hit Damien. “You always ruin the fun.”

“Come in.” Jess shook her head and glanced at me. “They’re an old married couple.”

“Maybe he realized you aren’t really his type.” I snorted. “He determined an MMA-fighter-sized man that can roar is more his speed.”

“Please tell me you aren’t talking about us.” Cole opened the door and marched in. “Because Damien would never be my type.”

“Thank God.” Damien side-eyed me. “Sometimes you are a little unpredictable.”

“Guess what happened.” Jess wrapped her arm around my shoulders. “We have wedding colors and a place, Rage’s home.”

“Technically, it’s his parents’ house.” Cole paused and rubbed his chin. “And we don’t own our place here, so it’s similar to us being homeless.”

“Yes, Cole.” Damien rubbed his temples. “That’s exactly right. We don’t have a roof over our heads.”

“But where are Rage and Raven going to live when they get married?” Cole raised an eyebrow.

“I’m assuming he’ll be staying here like he does every night anyway.” Jess walked over and kissed Cole’s cheek.

“That’s all I get?” Cole grabbed her waist and pulled her up against him. He lowered his lips onto hers for a real kiss.

“And you talked about me getting a room.” They were going at it. At least Rage and I had some control.

“Where’s Rage?” Damien sniffed the air. “He was here a few seconds ago.”

“Yeah, he’s in my room, calling his mom about the wedding.” It was a little surreal that in less than two months, I’d be Mrs. Jackson.

“We’re going to be late meeting Luna if he doesn’t hurry.” Damien stepped into the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of water.

“Don’t worry. I’m ready.” Rage stopped in his tracks when he caught sight of Cole and Jess. “That’s not cool.” He strode over and punched Cole in the arm.

“Fine.” Jess giggled as she pulled away. “Unfortunately, we can’t be a couple outside these walls. You two can.”

That particular truth hit hard. I wasn’t sure how to respond.

“Hey, I didn’t mean it as hateful.” Jess came over and bumped shoulders with me.

“We’ll have more of that later.” Cole winked at her and then glanced at Rage. “You ready now?”

“We were waiting for you.” Rage’s brow furrowed.

“No, we were waiting for you, so I made good use of the time.” Cole slapped Jess’s ass.

“Hey.” Her face flushed with either arousal or the surprise at the attention.

I decided on surprise just for my own sanity.

“Guys, we have a few more minutes to get there.” Damien opened the door and waved us on. “Let’s get going.”

“SO TODAY we’re going to be discussing covens.” Luna stood in front of us and lifted the pendant that was on her necklace high enough so we all could see. “This is my coven’s symbol.”

It was a large, five-point pentagram with the tree of life growing inside the middle and was made of silver.

When she held it up, it smelled of similar magic; a mix of herbs and spices. “Every woman from my coven wears this symbol. We never take it off, ever.”

“That’s gorgeous.” Jess leaned forward in her desk, wanting to get a closer look. “They all look exactly the same?”

“Well, they are made when we each turn sixteen and become an official, acting member of the coven.” She ran her finger over the pendant. “Each person makes their own. Once they do, they are connected to the coven.”

“Wow, that’s amazing.” I’d never heard of these things before, so this class was very interesting.

“I’m glad you approve.” Luna dropped the pendant but let it stay on the outside of her black shirt. “You see, our coven is very similar to

your pack."

"Oh, I don't have a pack." Jess shook her head and frowned. "Fae aren't like shifters."

"But you do." Luna lifted her thumb to her lips. "Are you saying that you don't know?"

"Don't know what?" Damien glanced over at Rage as if he was looking for the answer.

"You five are your own pack." Luna smiled and huffed.

"That's not possible." Cole lifted his pointer finger in the air, swirling it around. "Yes, these people are my family, but as Jess said, only shifters have packs."

"See, that's not exactly true." Luna took a few steps back and focused on each of us, one at a time. "In rare cases, when people bond enough to feel that you all are a true family, a pack can emerge between them. It's very rare because each person must feel the exact same way. To be honest, it hasn't happened in hundreds of years since each race segregated themselves and tried to become the most powerful. You all have a connecting bond, but it obviously hasn't become official."

"Official?" Damien leaned back in his seat and popped his fingers.

Maybe that's why I hadn't suffered as a rogue wolf. I'd been around at least one of them every day since leaving my birth pack.

"It makes sense that you wouldn't know." Luna walked over to her bag and pulled out a worn, leather book. "A witch must be part of the ceremony." She flipped through the pages and eventually stopped. Her finger ran over the words, and a smile pulled at the corners of her mouth. "Yes, that's correct. A witch of white magic. Good thing, you're in luck."

"So you're saying we could become a real pack?" Rage glanced at me.

"If you all agree, then yes." She held the book open, keeping her right hand on the page that must talk about the ceremony. "It's a simple ceremony."

"Let me guess, blood is involved." Damien ran his hand through his hair.

"Of course." Luna hadn't taken offense to his condescending tone. "Family are linked by blood whether good, bad, or indifferent. So that's what's missing between you five."

"I think we're pretty good with blood. Who drinks blood daily?" Cole pointed his thumbs at himself. "This guy."

"Really?" Luna's brows furrowed and she shook her head. "How old are you again?"

"Don't hate." Cole crossed his arms and sat back.

"Anyway, it's not about drinking blood." Luna held up the book for

us all to see. “It’s about combining blood so that a piece of each of you is in each other.”

Could it be possible that the five of us could be joined for the rest of our lives? Granted, Rage was a given for me, but moving from friends to pack was a big step.

“I would be honored to perform the ritual if you decide to make this official.” She was about to close the book when Cole said, “Stop.”

He took a deep breath and looked at all of us. “If we can be a pack, I’m all in.”

“You know what, me too.” Jess turned toward me. “What about you all?”

It might have sounded cool to them, but they didn’t know what they were getting themselves into. “Being a pack is a big deal.” I had to be honest with them. “Your thoughts aren’t your own at times, and usually there is an alpha in charge.”

“That’s a good point.” Rage leaned forward, glancing at Damien and then the others on my side. “We are all attending an essentially alpha school, how would that work when we all want to be at the top?”

“I’m fine with Raven being our alpha.” Damien's words made my whole world seem to stop.

“What?” I couldn’t have heard that correctly.

“I agree with that.” Cole chimed in.

“Why me?” They were all stronger than me and had been at this school longer too. Hell, my entire life, I hadn’t known the truth about my parents and my upbringing.

“Because you came here with nothing, and look at you now?” Jess reached over and grabbed my hand. “You brought us all together, and you do what you think is best for everyone … not just yourself. You’re a true leader that we could all get behind.”

Still, it wasn’t right. To me, either Rage or Damien should have been alpha.

“I agree one hundred percent.” Rage’s eyes filled with adoration as he addressed me. “You were the missing piece, and I’d be honored to serve my mate.”

“Well, it sounds like you settled the main problem.” Luna laughed as she went back and pulled out her bowl. “Now, this isn’t a spell that can be easily broken. You all need to make sure that you are committed to this, to have it work for the rest of your life.”

“I’m sure.” Jess nodded her head.

“Me too.” Cole smacked his leg.

There was a slight pause, so Luna faced Rage and Damien. “Don’t feel pressured. We need to make sure everyone is committed.”

“Believe it or not, I’m in too.” Damien shook his head. “Even with

Cole. What's wrong with me?"

"See, you do love me." Cole stuck his tongue out at Damien. "From now on, you can't complain about me."

"Yeah, right," Damien grumbled.

"I'm in too." Rage glanced at me. "Now it's all up to you."

"Of course, I'm in." There wasn't a doubt in my mind. In the past two years, these four people had become my everything.

"There is a full moon tonight. We need to meet somewhere that the moon can shine on us at its peak as the ritual is performed. It'll make the bond stronger."

"Then I know exactly where we can meet." Rage reached over and took my hand.

My emotions were all over the place. I was ecstatic for this group to be my pack, but they wanted me to lead them. I wasn't sure how good of a leader I could be though.

Chapter Eight

When we settled back in at the dorm, we barely spoke more than a word to each other. We were all processing everything that had gone down with Luna.

Rage and I, of course, were fine with it. However, the other three had some serious thinking to do before we showed up at midnight. “It’s been unusually quiet.”

“Well, we did get a load dumped on us.” Damien walked over to one of the side chairs and plopped down.

“Dude, really?” Cole lifted his hands in the air. “You had to phrase it that way?”

“What?” Damien glanced at me as if I had all the answers.

“Why do you encourage him?” Rage chuckled as he took my hand, pulling me toward our couch.

“Load and dump were both used in the same sentence.” Cole pointed to his ass like that explained everything. “You had to do that on purpose.”

“Why are you showing me your ass?” Damien closed his eyes and leaned his head back. “And no, I’m not a person stuck in fifth grade where everything is talking about shit.”

“Normally, I’d be offended.” Cole moved his hand in a gesture of him ramming something in his ass. “But you’ve always had something up your ass.”

“And you get on to him for innuendos, and you did a sexually suggestive move.” Jess gave Damien a thumbs up. “I got you.”

“Traitor.” Cole pointed his finger toward her. “You’re always supposed to be on my side.”

“You know that’s not how it works, right?” Just because you may be in a relationship with someone didn’t mean they had to agree with everything the other person thought or said.

“Really?” Cole’s mouth dropped open. “You’re taking his side too?”

“There are no sides.” Dear lord. This is a good example of why they needed to seriously consider becoming a pack.

“Rage, it’s you and me, buddy.” Cole held his arms open for a hug.

“No.” Rage placed his arm over my shoulders. “That’s not true.”

“You’re killing me.” Cole came over and plopped down next to me.

“When I said unusually quiet, I didn’t mean to resort to this.” I needed to watch what I asked for next time.

“Anyway, what I believe Raven was trying to say is that no one has brought up the pack conversation.” Rage’s thumb began rubbing my shoulders. “This is a huge deal.”

“There is no question for me. I’m in.” Cole smiled. “There is a reason why I don’t talk to my parents much, and it’s because I’m a burden to them. They’ve always treated me that way. I’m an only child. Not exactly planned; it was an accident. You guys are my family. I know I rag you guys and cut up, but this feels right to me. And let’s be real, it’d be awesome to be the first vampire ever in a pack.”

At Christmas, I had finally picked up on the fact that there was something odd about Cole’s relationship with his parents, and to hear it confirmed broke my heart. “You know I love you? I don’t think I’ve ever said the words, but yes, you dance to your own drum, and I give you a hard time. But I wouldn’t trade you for anything in this world.”

“Yeah, what she said.” Damien nodded his head.

“I’m in too.” Jess came over and sat beside me on the couch. “My family is great, but before you all, I didn’t have any friends or truly belong anywhere. This isn’t a rash decision for me. You all are the family I’d been missing.”

I reached over and hugged her neck. Both Cole and Jess told me their reasons, which made me feel better. Now it was Damien. Bears were normally loners, so a pack would go against the grain for him.

The last thing I wanted to do was put him on the spot, but we didn’t have days to make the decision.

“So, I guess it’s my turn.” Damien bit his bottom lip and stared at the ground. “My natural instincts are to be alone.”

This didn’t surprise me. Bears did spend time with their families but only until they found their mates. They usually flew solo.

“But…” He took in a deep breath and pulled on his white polo. “You guys are family. She’s right, and I resonate with what everyone has already said. So, I’m down with the bonding.”

I hadn’t thought of it that way. A pack was a bond, not just mind linking.

“What about you two?” Jess turned her body in our direction.

“When I think about my last pack, it helps me figure out what I need in the future.” My birth pack had been all about Jerry and Greg and what they wanted. There were times that they focused on members of the pack, but it was normally when something horrible hit them. They didn’t focus on the pack’s daily needs. “And there is no other group I’d be honored to form a pack with.”

“I’d been wondering why I didn’t feel like a rogue wolf.” Rage huffed and pulled me in closer. “I thought it might have been Raven filling that void, but when Luna brought our group’s connection to our attention, it made sense. It was Raven but also you three.”

“Aw, now that we’ve all expressed our feelings.” Cole touched his chest and pretended to cry. “It’s time for a huge group hug.”

“Because I said you were family doesn’t mean I want to hug your ugly ass.” Damien leaned back in his seat as if that would solve the problem.

“The one who protests the hardest is the one who needs it the most.” Cole jumped on Damien and wrapped his legs around the chair and his arms around Damien’s neck. “I love you.”

“Get off.” Damien groaned, but there was a slight smile that poked through. “No means no.”

“Should I be jealous?” Jess glanced at me as she giggled. “I mean, he’s hugging him better than he does me.”

“Yeah, you should drag him off me,” Damien muttered as Cole stood back on his feet.

“Then it’s settled.” Tonight, I’d have a pack again.

IT WAS A QUARTER BEFORE MIDNIGHT. Luna wanted us to get there early so we had time to set everything up.

I wasn’t exactly sure what she meant, but we weren’t going to press the issue.

While we were walking through the forest, heading to the clearing, I noticed Jess had an extra bounce in her step. I hadn’t realized that she had never been up here until she pointed it out.

As we approached the clearing, the moon was rising high in the night sky. There wasn’t a cloud visible, and the stars were brighter than normal. The leaves were varying shades of red, orange, and green, emphasizing that fall was in full swing.

Luna stood in the middle of the clearing with candles forming a circle around her. Her eyes glowed when they met mine which made the different colors stand out more.

“Whoa.” Jess’s mouth dropped open.

It took me a second to realize all five of us had stopped to stare. I stepped into the clearing and nodded to Luna. “I didn’t realize we were late.”

“You aren’t.” Luna lifted what was cradled in her hands in the air. “I needed to prepare.”

It didn’t surprise me that she held a small, dark bowl. “We could’ve helped.”

“No, dear. You couldn’t.” She pointed to one of the candles. “There are five candles that surround me. Please, each of you take your spot next to one.”

“Woot. Woot.” Cole rushed past me and picked a spot. “Let’s do this.”

“How did I know I could count on your enthusiasm?” Luna grinned and glanced back at the rest of us. “Come now.”

My feet had to weigh at least an extra fifty pounds as I headed to the circle. I picked the spot that was currently in front of her.

The other three followed me in. Jess took the spot to my right, which placed her next to Cole, and Rage took the other side of mine.

"Good, now that you are all here, there are some things that I must say." She walked within the circle, speaking to us all. "This will be intense at first, especially for those who have never had a pack-like connection before."

"Thanks for the warning." Damien cleared his throat.

She continued to pace, not reacting to his comment. "As I prepared for this, something pulled at my heart. I opened myself to it, and then I realized what it was trying to tell me." She stopped in front of me. "This bond is what you need to survive and to make an impact."

"You told us earlier today." Cole snapped his fingers and pointed at her. "So no more incentive is needed."

"Cole ... Now isn't the time." Jess hissed under her breath.

"We will use our bond to do what's right." The words fell from my mouth as if a part of me knew what I needed to say.

"Good." She nodded her head and pulled a knife from the bag that was slung over her arm. "In a few moments, you each will need to prick your finger and drop your blood into the bowl."

"How much?" Jess's nose wrinkled.

"Just a drop." Luna stopped and faced her.

"Okay, good." Jess sighed, and her shoulders relaxed. "I'm not great with blood."

"Good thing you aren't a witch then." Luna winked at her and then began moving again. "When the moon shines bright, you will begin to feel a pull. That's all of you connecting and solidifying the bond, so don't be alarmed."

"Got it." All this talking was making me nervous. She was trying to prepare us, but damn. *Let's get this thing going.*

She handed the knife to me. "We'll start with you and go clockwise."

As I took hold of the knife, the weight of it surprised me. It was heavier than I expected, made of pure silver with an intricate design, displaying the exact same symbol as Luna's pendant. It was hauntingly beautiful.

"Are you okay with that?" Rage was a few feet away, but the concern was evident in his tone.

"Yeah, unless you want to go first." The thought of it didn't thrill me. I usually didn't want to cut myself on purpose.

"She needs to go first." Luna held her hand up toward Rage. "It's based on who holds the strongest connection amongst everyone, and it's her."

“I can do it.” I pointed to the knife. “Now?”

Luna glanced at the moon. “Yes, it’s time.”

I took a deep breath and used the tip of the knife to dig into my left pointer finger. It stung a little, but it wasn’t too bad.

“Here.” She held the bowl under my left hand and took back her knife. “Squeeze a drop out.”

Pressing on both sides of the cut, I waited until a good-sized bead formed and turned my hand over. The drop hit the center of the bowl.

“Good.” She glided over to Rage. “Your turn.”

Without saying a word, Rage took the knife and pricked the end of his finger like I’d done to mine. It didn’t take him long before he completed the ritual.

The other three completed the same action. As soon as Jess’s blood hit the center, Luna took her knife back and stood in the middle of our circle.

“Now it’s time.” Luna held the bowl high over her head as the moon brightened in the sky.

A breeze picked up around us.

“Bless the individuals who love one another. They ask for you to grant their bond.” Luna’s eyes closed as the breeze began to increase in speed.

Something tugged inside me, and at first, I fought for control. The tug became more desperate, and soon it was yanking hard as if a piece of me was being ripped out.

Luna’s words from earlier rang in my ears. She hadn’t exaggerated; I was being torn in half. The wind somehow blew harder and began circling our group, leaving everything else untouched.

I closed my eyes, attempting to center myself. We’d asked for this, so I had to let the magic do its work. When I stopped fighting, a gold cord appeared in front of me and yanked one last time. In its grasp was a piece of something white as though it came from my soul.

Golden cords appeared in front of the others, taking something from them similar to what had happened to me. When all five cords had what they needed, they began to circle us, matching the winds whipping around.

As they flew around us, the cords began to bleed one into another.

Lowering the bowl, Luna held it in front of her. The cords began closing in around her. They swirled so fast I couldn’t see where they began and ended.

Within seconds, the cords became one and shrank smaller and smaller, circling the bowl. When they reached the top of it, the cords dove into the bowl where our blood had combined.

“Thank you for the gift you bestowed upon us.” Luna once again held the bowl over her head, and the cords shot into the air, exploding

like a firework.

Sparks fell from the sky, landing on the five of us at each candle. A wave of emotion hit me all at one time.

Anxiety, fear, excitement, worry, hunger … all of these washed over me as if I was drowning.

“Raven,” Luna called for me.

Her voice added chaos to the emotions that weighed on me. Maybe we shouldn’t have trusted her. This wasn’t how a pack connected. What went wrong?

Chapter Nine

My name kept running through my mind, over and over again. My mind had to be playing tricks on me.

A warm hand touched me, and an earthy scent hit my nose. Rage was here, so I was sure I'd be safe.

"How the hell did this happen?" His voice tensed.

"I don't know." Luna's footsteps grew louder as she approached me. She kneeled beside me, and her warm, soft hand brushed some of my hair off my forehead. "It's the alpha bond."

"What?" Jess's voice joined the others. Her soft voice was a lot higher than normal, it vibrated painfully in my ears.

"How the hell did that happen?" Rage's raspy voice hit my ears. "We should've had to submit to her."

He was seriously pissed. This was going to be fun.

"You guys already did that earlier in the classroom." Luna flipped through the pages of her book. Or at least it sounded that way.

"I don't think crowding her is the answer." Damien's growly voice added to the mix.

"He's right," Rage said. "Everyone, except me and Luna, back up."

Panic flew at me from all around. I had never felt this before. My breathing increased, and tears filled behind my closed eyes.

"She's feeling all of our emotions." Cole's panicked voice washed over me. "Isn't that what alphas are supposed to do?"

"Damn, he's right," Rage growled out.

"Good, everyone calm down." Luna began whispering something under her breath that I couldn't quite make out. It sounded as if it were another language.

Something cold and somehow comforting spread through my body. The panic began to subside, and the fog seemed to lift.

I wasn't sure how long I'd lain there, but eventually, my senses came back to me. I opened my eyes to find five people hovering over me, staring. "Well, this isn't awkward at all."

"Oh, thank God." Jess snorted and clutched her chest.

"Are you okay?" Luna knelt beside me, touching my hand.

"Yeah, I don't know what happened." That was an understatement. I could feel relief from every person here except Rage. He was still upset. *What's wrong?*

His eyes widened. *I thought I was losing you.*

Guess you're still stuck with me. I tried to keep my tone light. He had been scared, and I felt the full extent of it.

"Why are they staring at each other like that?" Jess's eyes glanced

from me to Rage.

"They're mindspeaking." Damien took a few steps back. "I'm glad she's okay."

Fart. Pencil. Booger. Penis. Cole's voice entered my head. *Lingerie. Poop.*

"You went from lingerie to poop?" His mind might be a scary place to be.

"It worked." With the palm of his hand, he hit his chest. "Hell yeah."

"But …" Jess's brows furrowed.

"Please don't ask. That'll encourage him." Damien rubbed his hand down his face. "After what happened, I can't take it."

"Hey, why can't I link with you?" Cole pouted. "Or are you ignoring me?"

"Yes, I am." Damien's jaw clenched. "This isn't the time for your antics."

The hurt that Cole felt hit me in the gut. "He was trying to lighten the mood." The first step to defuse some nerves would probably be standing on my own.

"Do you need help?" Rage bent down and grabbed my hand.

"I'll never say no to you." I needed everyone to relax and fast. All of the charged emotions coming from them were a bit overwhelming.

When I was back on my feet, Rage wrapped his arms around my waist, crushing me to his chest. "I was so damn scared."

"I know." I gave him a faint smile. "I felt it."

"It must have been all the strong emotions crashing down on you at one time." Luna closed her book and frowned. "That has never happened before, but the description around the ceremony said shortly after, an alpha must be established. I think you guys did it backward, which caused the issue."

"Yeah, the feelings were overwhelming, and to be honest, I'm still a little disoriented." I hadn't realized what it meant to be the official alpha. This was going to take some getting used to.

"It'll get better." Rage gave me a tight smile. "Dad had mentioned it was a little overwhelming when he was officially passed the role."

Maybe you would be the better fit. All of them had more time at the school and hadn't gone through all of my struggles. I didn't want this to cause problems between him and me.

If you want me to, I'd do it for you. But you were the one everyone wanted. He leaned over and kissed my forehead. *Including me, remember?*

He was right. I'd have to figure this out like I'd done everything else.

"Maybe you should go get some rest." Damien picked one of the

candles up off the ground and blew it out.

"That is an excellent idea." Rage grabbed my hand as he glanced at Luna. "Do we need to do anything else?"

"No, I'll gather everything and be on my way." Luna took the candle from Damien.

"Do you need any help?" Jess went over and picked up another candle from the ground.

"Please, all of you go." Luna waved her hand back in the direction where we'd come from. "There is a science to cleaning up a ceremony. I'll be fine."

Not needing any additional encouragement, Rage and I headed home.

ON OUR WAY back toward the dorms, Jess and Cole chatted loudly, telepathically. They were mind linking and having fun.

As we stepped back onto the Academy's grounds, Damien glanced my way. "Hey, Jess and Cole, why don't we go back to our dorm. That way, you can keep practicing the pack link, and Raven can get some good sleep?"

"Oh, yeah." Jess glanced at me and smiled. "That's probably a good idea. Are you sure you don't need me?"

"No, I'll be fine." Honestly, that sounded like heaven. I was exhausted and wanted some sleep.

You owe me. Damien raised an eyebrow my way.

Deal. It was a nice gesture. *Thank you.*

The three of them headed in the direction of the guys' dorms as Rage and I continued the trek home.

Within minutes, we were walking through my door.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Rage turned my way and examined my face.

"I'm fine." I was so out of it I hadn't realized how badly he had been scared. "I promise. It was just overwhelming."

"Then let's get you some rest." He led me to my bedroom. "Go on and crawl into bed."

A shower would've been nice, but I didn't have the energy to attempt it. Following his instructions, I removed my shoes and slipped under the covers. When my body hit the mattress, I took a deep breath.

"Do you need anything?" Rage removed his shoes and moved back to the door.

"Nope." There was one thing I wanted. "Well, other than you over here, holding me."

"The sacrifices I make for you." He winked at me as he shut my

door and locked it.

He quickly joined me and wrapped his arm over my waist. He leaned into my hair, taking a deep breath. “I thought you weren’t going to make it. That the witch had somehow tricked us.”

“It’s funny because I had thought the same thing.” Okay, funny might have been pushing it, but still. “I kept hearing my name called even though I had blacked out.”

“You were incoherent for about five minutes.” He pulled me closer to his body. “I was scared out of my mind.”

Somehow, Rage had opened the connection between us, and I could feel how much he loved me. I couldn’t stop myself from leaning over and kissing his lips.

He responded by kissing me more passionately than ever before. He opened his mouth, allowing my tongue entrance. My hands wrapped around his neck and into his hair. These feelings we were finally able to share merged and made the kiss more magical than ever.

Not able to resist, I rolled on top of him and began to grind.

“Stop.” He lifted me gently, and his voice was raspy but, for once, not from anger. “You’re tired.”

The last thing I wanted to do was sleep. “Nuh-uh.” I lowered my head so I could reach his lips once more and began kissing him again.

“Rave.” His mouth formed the words against my lips. “You need your rest.”

Not at the moment, I didn’t. I began kissing down his face and made it to his neck. When I reached the soft high point of his neck, I bit down gently.

He began breathing harder as I began to suck. “You’re going to be the death of me.”

Scraping my teeth against his throat once more, I allowed my hand to travel down his chest. Once I reached the top of his jeans, I unbuttoned them and slipped my hand beneath his boxers.

A loud growl escaped from him. “You’re not being good.” He tossed me on my back and ripped off my t-shirt. “You lay back and rest while I take care of you.”

I wanted to object. Yet, he reached around me and managed to easily unfasten my bra, tossing it to the floor. Then, he suckled at my breast as if he couldn’t get enough.

We were feeding off each other’s emotions, and I got lost in the moment. It felt like only he and I existed in the entire world.

He yanked my pants off and entered me in one quick thrust. I held on to him as we both rode high on our new, fresh bond. When we both climaxed, we came tumbling back to reality.

“Damn.” He leaned down and kissed my lips softly. “That was

amazing."

"Yes, it was." I almost didn't want the moment to end, but my phone dinged by the bed. "Who the hell is texting me this late?"

"Maybe it's one of the others checking on you." He rolled off of me, and I reached over to the end table, grabbing my phone.

I opened the text, and my heart dropped.

Meet me at the Cafe Du Monde at 8 AM. Your next target awaits.

"YOU KNOW, we should probably get our own car." We kept needing to borrow Cole's, but it was a pain at times.

"Yeah, you're right." Rage opened the passenger door of the red Audi. "For you, my love."

I brushed my lips against his and sat in the car. "Thank you."

He winked at me as he shut the door and made his way to the driver's side of the car.

It didn't take us long before we were on the road, heading to meet Professor Shaw.

"What kind of car do you think we should get?" Rage reached over, placing his hand on my thigh.

"Oh, I have no clue. One that's reliable and gets us places." It was a nice thought, but hell, I didn't have any money. "But I guess we need to wait until I get a job."

"Nah, I've got enough saved up for us to get a car." Rage squeezed my leg gently.

"If that is the case, why don't you have one already?" It was silly that he relied on Cole to take him everywhere.

"I had no reason to." Rage shrugged as he turned on the main road leading us to downtown. "I mean I just had school and did things to pass time. Now, I have someone who I want to go out and do things with, without Cole having to be included or bribed."

That was true. Every time we asked to borrow his car, he'd make a big deal out of it and tell us we owed him. I hated to think what he'd ask for when he cashed in.

"I'd hate for you to use all your money on a car though." We'd never discussed money before. How was that possible when we'd been mated for two years and were getting married next month?

"That's not a piece of it, and hell, it's our money now." Rage grinned at me. "My grandparents left me a trust, so we're fine."

"I can't believe it took me until now to learn that." I wasn't sure how I felt about that whole thing.

"He started a biological company named Jackson, Inc." Rage shrugged, trying to downplay it. "Dad works in the business, but when Pops passed, the company was inherited by my grandfather's nephew

from Bloodshed. Since he knew that it wouldn't be handed down to us, he set aside a trust for each of us."

"Were you upset when he didn't leave it to your Dad?" That seemed a little odd to me.

"Nah, he was open about it from the very beginning. His nephew helped him start it up anyway. It was only right."

At least there wasn't any tension about the decision.

We pulled into the heart of New Orleans. "Are you ready for this?" He parked in an empty spot and turned the car off.

The French Quarter was gorgeous. I couldn't believe it was my first time here. "Yeah, as ready as I'll ever be."

We climbed out of the car, and as I turned to head toward the cafe, Professor Shaw appeared.

He placed his fingers through the belt loops of his usual black jeans. "Right on time."

There was no way to respond, so I kept quiet, and so did Rage.

"No questions about why you're here?" Professor Shaw leaned back against the wall.

"I figure it's for another," I said as I glanced around to ensure there were no listening ears, "situation."

"Situation." For the first time, a genuine smile spread across his face. "I hadn't heard it called that before, but yeah. I like it."

Can I punch him in the face? Rage's words popped into my head.

Don't I wish? I hated the man standing before us, but we still had to play our part. *Maybe we'll get to before it's all over.*

"But yes, there is a girl in there who should be finishing up her breakfast." He tilted his head and stared at me. "You seem different."

"I didn't take a shower this morning." I shrugged leaving it at that.

A snort echoed in my head from Rage.

Shaw jerked his head back and narrowed his eyes. "That's …"

"We should probably go in before she finishes and leaves." Rage pointed at the cafe.

"Yeah, she's in the seat closest to the door." Shaw motioned to a dark vehicle. "That's me, and I'll pull up when I see you begin moving out." He glanced at me as if he expected an argument similar to last time.

Don't get me wrong—I wanted to, but there was no point. We had to get deeper into the society and fast. The quicker we moved up, the sooner we could save them. I marched past him and headed for the door.

Slow down there, tiger. Rage grabbed my hand and caught up to me. *We're in this together.*

Yeah, sorry. I was on a mission. *Just want to get this over with.*

I understand, but let's do it together. He grabbed the door and

opened it for me. *Ladies first.*

As I walked through the door, my eyes went straight to our target. She had her head down as she sipped a cup of coffee. There was powder left on a small plate from her finished beignet.

The cafe was quaint with round tables and green chairs. It was busy, and I thought I saw two or three people that had coffee. Everyone else had coffees and beignets.

"Are you guys new here?" Our target stared at me. "You seem lost."

I turned toward her and smiled. "Yeah, we are. Is it that obvious?"

She flipped her teal hair over her shoulder, and her very light blue eyes gazed back at me. "Yeah, it is."

"Sorry, are we in your way?" Rage placed his hand around my waist and grimaced.

"Oh, no. You're fine." She tilted her head and scanned me from head to toe. "You're one too, aren't you?"

"I'm sorry." I tried to act confused, but I was relieved. She knew we were supernaturals.

More people came in, bumping into Rage and me.

"Would you mind stepping outside with me?" She pointed toward where we had come from. "I mean, if that's okay. I know you just got here."

"Move out of the way," a man grumbled as he tried to squeeze past us to get a table.

"Yeah, we'll go outside." I rolled my eyes as the man shoved past me.

"Okay, great." She picked her coffee mug up and drained the rest of it.

As I began to turn, I noticed an older man with a receding hairline who was staring at me from a corner booth across the room.

When my eyes met his, he didn't flinch but kept staring at me. *Who is that guy?*

Rage followed where I was looking. *What are you talking about? That's an empty seat.*

Chills rocked through me. Who the hell was he, and why was I the only one who see him?

Chapter Ten

"Are you okay?" The half-breed touched my arm, zapping me to the present.

Ouch. That hurt.

"Uh, yeah. Sorry." I tried to force a smile, but I was sure it fell short. Jess accused me of being constipated when I made an awkward face. The same look I was sure I was giving the girl now.

Rage chuckled, so it must have been bad.

"Come on, babe." Rage glanced back toward where I had pointed and shook his head. *I still see nothing.*

"Yeah, okay." I couldn't help but take one last peek at the man. "Let's go." It couldn't be a coincidence that only I could see him.

When we stepped outside, the girl spun and reached for me again but stopped. "Umm ... I didn't mean to hurt you."

"It's no big deal." She must have been part fae or something. "I'll heal in a few hours."

"So you are like me." A huge smile filled her face, and she laughed. "I've been thinking I was a freak for so long."

"Oh, no." I reached over and gently touched her arm. I needed to let her know I wasn't scared of her. "What do you think New Orleans is full of?"

"That's why I'm here." She bit her bottom lip. "I remembered that's where my mom was from, but that's it."

"Where are your parents?" Rage stiffened as the black car pulled up next to us.

"They died when I was young." She huffed and stomped at the ground. "The one thing they left me with is this." She pulled a small pin from her pocket. It was white with the words New Orleans on it.

Professor Shaw stopped and rolled down his window. "Hey, guys. You aren't going in after all?"

"Nah, we ran into our friend here and decided to come outside." Rage stepped toward the wall and leaned on it.

"It's always nice to meet another witch." Shaw grinned and nodded his head.

"Witch?" Her voice sounded breathless. "That's what I am?"

"You don't know?" His mouth dropped and eyes widened. "Really?"

A car pulled up behind him and blew the horn.

"Shit, I've got to get going." He looked over his shoulder. "I'm causing a traffic jam."

I already knew where this was going, and my stomach sunk.

“It was nice meeting you.” She frowned and fidgeted with her fingers.

“Look, I was going to go run some errands, but if you’d accompany me, we could talk more.” Professor Shaw motioned for her to get in. “You’ll need to hurry if you’re interested.”

She hesitated for a moment before she hurried over and got in the car.

The car behind them blew its horn again. “Hurry up.”

Professor Shaw shifted the car into drive, and when he began pulling away, the girl stuck her head out the open window. “Thank you for talking to me.”

At least we didn’t have to persuade her or lie to get her into the car. In all reality, it didn’t make this any better though. She was still going to get tossed wherever they took them.

Did she hurt you? Rage reached over and turned my arm over.

Where she had touched me were burn marks from her fingertips. “Yeah, but she didn’t mean to.” She ’hadn’t been able to control herself. Been there, done that, and it sucked.

A witch can’t do that. Rage brushed his fingers over the spot, making me flinch.

Yeah, her other half must be fae. Wow, that combination could be deadly.

“Come on, let’s go home.” Rage took my hand and led me to the car.

I wanted a coffee but didn’t want to go back into the cafe. That man still haunted me. “Can we hit Starbucks on the way back?”

“Of course.” He opened the door for me, and I glanced behind him. *I feel as if someone is watching us.*

As I slipped into the seat, I spotted the man standing by the door of the cafe, his eyes meeting mine. *Because there is. Let’s go.*

The man grinned as if he knew the effect he had on me.

The slamming of the driver’s side door broke whatever spell the man had me under.

“Is it that guy from the cafe?” Rage looked over his shoulder as he pulled out.

“Yeah, did you see him?” Maybe my mind wasn’t as far gone as I thought.

“No, but you had the same look in your eyes.” Rage hit the steering wheel with his hand. “How am I supposed to protect you from something I can’t see?”

“Really?”I snorted and glanced over at him. “I believe last time, I was the one who kinda saved your ass. I mean Nate knocked you out right away.”

“You better be glad I love you.” He pulled onto the main road and

put his hand back on my thigh. “But damn, can you at least not tear my ego completely down.”

“I’m sorry, baby.” I giggled and leaned over to kiss his cheek. “I’m so glad you’re a big, strong man who can protect my weak, scared little self.” I batted my eyes and placed a hand over my heart. “I couldn’t leave the dorm if I didn’t have you.” I pushed my hair behind my ear. “Feel better now?”

Rage glanced at me and pouted. “I’m pretty sure you made it worse.”

As I opened my mouth, realization crashed back over me. “Do you think she’ll be okay?”

“Just as okay as the others.” Rage frowned, and he pulled in a long, deep breath. “We’ll find them. I know it.”

I wished I felt as confident. The closer we thought we got, the further away our goal moved to be unattainable.

I TOOK a long sip of my latte as we walked down the hall to my apartment. Rage and I figured we should be nice and pick up coffee for the others too. The thing was I wanted to at least give Cole a hard time first.

Rage stayed in the hallway as I opened the door and walked in.

Cole and Jess were on the couch, watching television.

Jess’s eyes zeroed in on my cup. “Where’s mine?”

“What?” I looked at my empty hand. “Oh yeah, I got a latte.”

“You didn’t get me anything?” Jess huffed and paused the TV. “What the hell?”

“I lend you my car, and you can’t get me anything?” Cole stood and crossed his arms. “You should’ve at least brought me something back.”

“And your girlfriend too.” Jess zeroed in on him. “Right?”

It took every ounce of my control not to laugh. Within a minute of my arrival, Cole had already gotten himself in trouble.

“Uh. Yeah, sure.” Cole marched toward me. “Where is the pup who follows you around all the time, and where is my coffee?”

Did he say that about me? There wasn’t any humor in Rage’s tone.

“Here, you can have mine.” I held it out toward him.

“No, I don’t want your fat-free, mocha, java, ash-blonde drink.” Cole leaned over and sniffed my cup. “I don’t know what that is.”

“First off, it’s a nonfat, blonde latte with vanilla.” Wow, they were both this upset over coffee. It’s a good thing we brought them something. I might have been afraid, from here on out, to not keep them caffeinated.

“It doesn’t matter.” Cole crossed his arms and stuck out his tongue.

“A little consideration would’ve been nice.”

“Like this?” Rage walked in with two cups in hand.

“Yes.” Cole marched over, trying to grab one.

“No, no.” Rage moved the cup from his reach. “What am I?”

“Uh … what do you mean?” Cole’s eyes stayed completely focused on the cup.

“You said I followed her around like a pup.” Rage lifted Cole’s cup higher. “Did you mean it?”

“Fine, you follow her around like the beast you truly are,” Cole growled at him. “Give me the damn drink.”

“See, was that hard?” Rage lowered the cup and handed it to Cole.

“You weren’t upset about him saying you follow me around everywhere?” Sometimes I’d think I had them figured out just to prove quite the opposite.

“Why would I be?” He leaned over and kissed my lips. “It’s true. Just not puppy-like.”

“Speaking of mushy,” Jess said as she grabbed her cup of coffee and took a sip, “your wedding is now officially planned.”

I needed a little bit of happiness after the morning we had. Through my alpha bond with Jess, I felt how happy and proud she was. Her doing this meant a lot more to me than I realized. “Yay. Can I see everything you picked out?”

“Really, you want to see it?” The smile that filled her face was priceless.

“If you don’t mind.” To be honest, I meant it. Every time I saw her the past few months, she was always working on it. Even when she and Cole watched TV, she would be on her phone, scrolling Pinterest and bridal blogs. She had put her heart and soul into planning it.

“Not at all, come on.” She rushed over to the couch and put her coffee on the table, and patted the seat next to her. “I want you to look at these flowers we ordered.”

You made her day. Rage’s voice was a caress inside my mind.

It’s long overdue. I leaned toward Jess and watched as she scrolled through the pages.

AS I SAT at the table for breakfast, Jordan entered the cafeteria. She was dressed in our standard uniform, but her usual confidence was gone.

I can’t believe she’s back. I projected the thought to the other four.

Jess set her tray down and followed the direction I nodded my head. Her mouth dropped open. *She doesn’t look like herself at all.*

She still looks just as slutty to me. Cole took the seat next to Jess as usual. *Maybe whoever she was with got tired of her and made her come*

back.

You're awfully negative about vampires. Damien set his tray on the table and shook his head.

That's not true. Cole waved his finger around the room. *I'm awfully negative about anyone outside of our pack.*

"What are you guys doin'?" Rage sat in the chair next to me and glanced around the table. *You guys are mind speaking and coming off weird. Get your shit together. We're in public.*

"Sorry, I was deep in thought." I tried to shake my head as if I was coming out of a daze.

"Good save." Cole winked at me and gave me a thumbs up.

"Sometimes I worry about you." Damien took a bite of his food and shook his head.

"Aw, I love you too, big guy." Cole grabbed his usual breakfast drink and took a long sip.

"Does anyone realize, in a few weeks, these two will be married?" Jess stabbed her pancake with a fork. "Soon, Raven will be Mrs. Jackson."

"Sorry, Mrs. Jackson, I am for real." Cole snapped his fingers to the beat in his head.

Rage picked off a piece of his biscuit and threw it at Cole. "Shutty."

"You can't silence a classic." Cole flipped him off.

"That's not close to a classic." Damien sighed as he pulled out his phone. "Dammit, Isadora wants to meet with us."

"By us, you mean?" Rage took a sip of his orange juice and placed it back on the tray.

"Well, she said you and your friends." Damien shrugged.

"That sucks for you." Cole frowned and slumped his shoulders. "It'll be awkward when you and your momma show up." Then he busted out laughing.

Oh, dear lord. Leave it to Cole to make a horrible joke.

"What?" Damien frowned, and his eyebrows pulled together. "Why would my mom go to her office?"

"Because she's your one friend." Cole lifted his hands, palms up. "It's funny."

"We better hurry up." Rage stuffed some food into his mouth. "You know how she gets."

That was an understatement. She wasn't known for her patience. I grabbed a piece of bacon and took a bite. It was odd because we hadn't talked about the last target. Damien hadn't been around, and Jess was completely wrapped up in wedding planning. And Cole, well, he was Cole. He had been distracted by the Starbucks. "When we have a minute, we all probably want to touch base on what happened the

other day." I wanted to throw that out there so we wouldn't forget.

"Yeah, I planned on us talking about it when we got back to your dorm after meeting with Luna." Damien shoveled some more food into his mouth. "I was tied up with some freshmen. They had me training yesterday though."

"That sounds familiar." He seemed to get stuck with the incoming freshmen a lot lately since he was still training me. "And I can't wait to get into the gym tomorrow."

"Ugh, you'll never hear those words come out of my mouth." Jess shook her head so hard that her hair bounced. "I'll leave all that to you shifters."

"And vampires." Cole lifted his arms and flexed. "Gotta love these guns."

Cole never worked out, ever. What muscle he had was a blessing from being a vampire.

"Alright, guys. We better head out." Rage stood and grabbed his tray. "She's texting me now."

All of us threw our stuff in the trash and headed toward the connector between the cafeteria and the main building.

"Raven." Jordan's familiar voice called out my name.

What the hell does she want? Rage was already annoyed.

Like I know any more than you. I glanced at him and rolled my eyes.

"Can I talk to you for a second?" She bit her bottom lip and glanced at Rage and Cole. "Alone?"

"Yeah, sure." I followed her several feet away and stopped when she turned back to face me.

"Hey, they're allowing me to come back to school, but I'm being watched." Jordan rubbed her arms and glanced around. That's when I noticed a scar on her face. It looked as if she had a huge gash from her nose to her ear.

"What happened to your face?" That had to have happened recently, and I had a strong suspicion who did it.

She huffed and smirked. "Let's say I didn't know what I was fighting for."

"I'm so sorry." Even though we had never been friends, I wouldn't wish torture on anyone.

"No, stop." She rubbed the place in question. "Be careful. They aren't who you think they are."

Now hell hath frozen over. She was trying to be nice and warn me. Still, maybe this was their play. I couldn't trust her. "I'm not sure what you're talking about."

"Oh, Jordan." Professor Shaw entered the connector and smiled at us. "I hadn't expected to see you here." His eyes lingered over me, and his smile looked odd. "Why don't you run along, Raven. Jordan and I

need to have a talk."

The last thing I wanted to do was leave her, but there wasn't a choice in the matter. I had a feeling she was going to get in trouble for talking to me, but if I stayed, it made everything worse for her and possibly me. There wasn't a right answer.

Chapter Eleven

"It's about time you all showed up here." Isadora stood behind her desk. "I've been texting you for over twenty minutes."

The last thing I wanted was to be lectured after leaving Jordan in that situation. "We were eating breakfast and got here as soon as we could. A little bit of patience would go a long way."

"Excuse me?" She adjusted her coral jacket over her matching skirt and glared at me.

Cole stepped beside me and placed his hands in a circle around his mouth. "Oh, she said …"

"I heard what she said, Mr. Smith." Her green eyes moved to him. "I'm not deaf."

"Well, you could see my confusion." Cole shrugged and winked at her. "I understand your urgent need to see me."

He was trying to protect me and have fun at the same time. Sometimes I wondered if he was a glutton for punishment.

Isadora glanced out her window. "I'm not sure I have the patience to deal with all of you."

"You did call us." Cole lifted his arms out, indicating all of us. "Not the other way around."

"I'm fully aware." She took a deep breath and sighed. Then her eyes fell on Jess. "What … is she doing here?"

"You said to bring my friends." Damien glanced in our direction. "These are my friends."

"Great, so we have another one added to the mix." She placed her hands on the desk and leaned over slightly. "And I'm taking it that she knows, too."

"Yup, I sure do." Jess nodded her head with a huge grin.

"Okay, well then." Her eyes settled on me. "What happened yesterday?"

"I'm not sure what you're referring to." For some reason, I still didn't fully trust her.

"Cut the crap." She stood straight again. "I followed Professor Shaw yesterday morning and found him meeting with you two." She pointed at Rage and me. "I left knowing that I could expect a full update from you and made sure I waited until today to request your presence in case you were being watched."

"Why were you meeting with Professor Shaw?" Damien stepped beside Rage.

"He has been our contact ever since Jordan was forced to step down." I searched our bond trying to figure out what he was feeling. I

hadn't considered his feelings, forgetting that Shaw was his mentor.

"They've got him brainwashed too." Damien pursed his lips and sighed. "They've got to be stopped."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that." Isadora picked a pen up from her desk and began tapping the palm of her other hand.

"No, he wouldn't do something like that." Damien rubbed his hand through his hair.

This wasn't going to go over well if I didn't change the direction of this conversation. "Apparently, our target was a girl who was half witch and half fae this time." I lifted my arm so she could see the burn spots left from her fingertips. They weren't completely healed yet, just scabbed over.

"That's a powerful combination." Isadora sighed and sat in her chair. "Did anything else happen?"

I'm not going to tell her about the man I saw. I figured Rage wouldn't bring it up, but I had to make sure. I wasn't ready to offer that little nugget to her. Maybe he wasn't related to The Elites at all.

My lips are sealed. He took a step closer to me so our arms were brushing.

"Nothing much." It had been one of the easiest missions to date. "She essentially asked us to talk outside, and Shaw pulled up."

"Do you think it could've been a test?" Isadora tapped her fingertips to her lips. "Maybe it was a setup."

"Nah, I don't think so." Rage shook his head. "She seemed clueless. Really clueless. I don't think it was an act unless she was good at it."

"Okay, stay alert." Isadora pointed at the rest of our group. "You three, please stay out of trouble."

"Why aren't they included in that?" Cole squeezed between me and Rage. He wrapped an arm around my shoulders and most of the way around Rage's.

"Because I've given up that hope with Ms. Wright, and since Rage is mated to her, him as well." Her shoulders sagged, and her fingers rubbed her forehead.

"Me too." Cole pounded on his chest. "I want to be hopeless as well."

"Really?" Damien narrowed his eyes at him.

"Have you ever noticed how many times you say that exact word to him with that particular expression or varying ones that are similar?" Jess arched an eyebrow at him.

"Honestly, sometimes it's a game." Cole talked in a loud whisper voice and placed his hand on the side of his mouth that wasn't facing Jess. "I keep tally," he said as he pointed to his head, "right up here in the ol' noggin."

"Why?" Damien lifted his hands in front of his chest. "I mean,

why?"

"Oh, dear God ..." Isadora closed her eyes and began making a shooing motion. "Go on to class before Jonathan gets suspicious."

Damien was the first one out the door. He stood in the hallway as the rest of us came out. *There is no way Professor Shaw is involved unless he's being lied to like you guys were.*

God, this mind link thing is so convenient. Jess bounced a little on the balls of her feet.

I wouldn't be so sure. Rage had a slight growl in his voice.

Rage had seen everything I had, but Damien hadn't. He just found out Shaw was involved. To be honest, I was kind of surprised we hadn't mentioned it to the group before. I linked to Rage. *Be careful, Damien's upset. He cares about Shaw and needs some time to settle into the idea.*

Fine, you're right. His voice had lost the growl.

"She was right." I took Rage's hand and tugged him in my direction. "Luna is going to kill us if we're late."

As we made our way to class, we found Luna standing in front of the room, tapping on her watch as we made our way to our usual seats.

"You're late." She crossed her arms and leaned back on her heels. "That's unacceptable."

"I'm sorry." Today we couldn't catch a break. "We got called into Isadora's office."

"You didn't tell her about the pack, did you?" For the first time, Luna appeared nervous.

"No, but why?" Rage sat in his seat and scooted it over a few inches closer to mine.

She should have been glad that we didn't tell anyone more than we needed to. "I didn't realize it was a secret." It was sad that my mindset was now the same philosophy that suggested keeping our cards close and guarded. I used to believe that kind of thinking was foolish and annoying, but the past three years had taught me it was how we'd survive.

"She wouldn't approve." Luna played with the pendant hanging from her neck. "Even though Isadora and I are on the same team for now, I have a feeling we won't be in the end."

"Oh, don't take it personally. She's a cold bitch to everyone." Cole slapped Damien on the shoulder. "Am I right?"

Damien glanced at him. "R …"

"Uh …" Jess pointed at him. "See, it hasn't been an hour, and you're about to do it again." She leaned back in her chair and placed her hands behind her head. "It encourages him."

"Stop giving away my secrets." Cole stuck his tongue out at Jess.

Here we go again. I had to reel it back in. “Are you thinking she’s not on our side?” The thought that I might have been misreading the headmaster made me upset to my stomach.

“Let me be careful how I say this.” Luna stared off as she tapped her long nail on the witch symbol in her hand. “Well, hell ... For some reason, I trust y’all. I think she does want to end the society, but she doesn’t like hybrids either.”

“Why do you say that?” Rage grabbed his phone from his pocket and put it on vibrate.

I loved how he acted disinterested when he wanted to know the answer. He’d told me before that’s when most people slip. They don’t think you’re paying attention and say more than they intended.

“From what I’ve been able to glean from her, she’s upset she’s not part of it. As if she was burned or shunned, so she wants to squash it.” Luna shrugged her shoulders. “Once again, that’s the sort of read I’ve taken on the energy that comes from her.”

“But your only concern is about your sister.” If we were telling truths, I may as well be blunt. “So why should we trust you?”

“That’s a fair question.” She paused a moment as if she was thinking through her answer. “At first, it was all about my sister. I won’t try to deny that, but then I think of all the other people who have had to suffer this loss simply because they’re different. It doesn’t seem right to turn my back on them. I mean witches suffered a similar fate back during the Salem witch trials. One witch exposed us and ruined it for all of us. What does that say about me with a similar heritage if we turn our backs on them?”

“That’s very admirable.” Jess popped a piece of gum into her mouth and blew a bubble.

“Isn’t that how The Elites make their cause sound too, though?” Damien frowned and scowled in her general direction.

“Really?” Cole’s mouth dropped open.

We needed to diffuse the tension in the room.

“Ha.” Jess laughed so hard she was clutching her side. “Now the roles have changed.” She laughed harder. “I’m sorry. It’s so strange watching Cole react to someone this way.”

If I hadn’t loved her before now, this would’ve done it. This was the perfect diffuser even though Damien didn’t find it funny.

“I’ve gotta go.” Damien stood and quickly marched to the door. “I’ll talk to you guys later.”

I’ll be back. I had to talk to him before he did something stupid. We couldn’t have him telling Shaw anything about our mission. I jumped to my feet and ran after him.

“Damien, wait.” I had to get him to stop and at least talk a little bit of reason into him. “Please.”

I caught up to him as he stepped outside. We were at the side of the building where the students didn't hang out. At least I had that going for me. "I want a second." Through my alpha bond, I could sense his turmoil.

"If I don't, are you going to force the alpha bond on me?" His dark gray eyes were filled with angst.

"No, of course not." I refused to be a dick alpha. He had a right to feel whatever way he needed. "It's just there's so much at stake."

"Look, I'm not going to say anything to Professor Shaw if that's what you're worried about." Damien rubbed his eyes and sighed. "I want to, but I won't."

He wasn't ready to talk, so I couldn't push him. We each needed to deal with our feelings in our own way. "Thank you. Look, we're all here for you. It's okay to feel upset."

His body relaxed as he reached out and brushed my arm. "You're a good leader."

For some reason, it made me feel uncomfortable. "Thanks." I wanted to step back but didn't want to add to his hurt.

"Rage is a damn lucky man." His tone turned lower, and he took a step closer to me.

"I'm sorry." This felt so wrong, and he was going to regret it later. "You know Rage is it for me."

He stopped and looked at the ground. "I know. I'm not trying to make you uncomfortable, and I shouldn't have said anything."

"It's okay." It was strange. He always came off as so strong and confident, but there was something rumbling underneath the surface. "If Rage wasn't in the picture, I could see myself falling for you. But he's here and my true mate. So I can only be here for you … as a friend."

"I need some time to myself, but I promise I won't do anything stupid." He finally looked me in the eyes again. "I'll come by after class sometime. When I'm ready."

"Let me know if you need anything." It was almost harder to let him go now than a few minutes ago. His feelings had gone from upset to hurt. "We're all here for you."

Without another word, he took off for the woods.

"HOW IS HE?" Cole asked as soon as I returned to the classroom.

"He'll be fine." There was no doubt in my mind that we would make it through this. "He needs some time to work through it. He did promise me that he wouldn't do anything stupid, so there aren't any worries there."

"Did anything else happen?" Rage scanned my face and tilted his

head.

*We'll talk later. N*ow wasn't the time for that conversation. "No, I hadn't realized how hard this would all hit him."

"That's how he works." Rage leaned his head to the side, popping his neck. "He doesn't let many people in, and when he does, he's damn loyal. I hadn't realized he'd taken that much to Professor Shaw."

"Everyone should know not to trust wi …" Jess stopped her sentence when Luna's gaze landed on her.

Luna placed a hand on her and cocked her head. "Not to trust who?"

"Now isn't the time to fight." I had a feeling Luna might be able to help me with the mystery man. "Since we're all being honest here and apparently threw whatever you were going to teach out the window, I need to ask you something."

"Go on." She leaned her head back and dropped her hand to her side.

"Is there a way someone can be somewhere but be hidden to everyone except one person?" I was banking on this being witchcraft.

"Yeah, but it's hard to do. Only a powerful witch or wizard can do it." She grabbed her spell book and began flipping through the pages.

"So who I saw was someone well versed in magic?" At least that narrowed it down to one race.

"Oh no. It could be anyone." She held up a hand-drawn picture of some sort of pentagon. "A lot of spells can be tied to an object so that the person wearing it doesn't necessarily have to know how to use magic. They could have had someone spell it and wear it whenever they want to be invisible."

Shit, that sucked and didn't give us any more of a lead on the guy. So it could have been anyone.

"So, what happened when you followed him out?" Rage wrapped his arm around me as we snuggled on the couch.

Cole and Jess had left to see if they could find Damien at home. They wanted me to use my alpha bond to locate him, but I had promised to give him space. I trusted he would show up when he was ready.

"Well, he was upset and irrational." I didn't want to tell Rage what happened, but I couldn't lie. "And he brushed my arm and said you were a lucky man."

"Hell yeah, I am." He pulled me closer. "I don't deserve you."

"It was a little awkward." That was a very true statement.

"I've thought for a while he had the hots for you." Rage kissed my

cheek and frowned.

"Nothing happened." I tried to downplay it, but Rage already knew something had happened.

He tapped me on the nose. "I know. I trust you and him. He lost his head a little, but he didn't do anything wrong. I'd be jealous too if you were his girl."

How did I ever doubt he wouldn't handle it that way? I was lucky to have him. "How did you know something happened?"

"I could smell him on you a little more than usual, and you seemed to be a little out of sorts." He shrugged and tickled my sides. "And who wouldn't want you?"

Giggles burst through me, and I tried to climb out of his reach. "Don't. Stop."

"Don't stop?" He tickled me more. "Okay."

The main door opened, and three pairs of eyes stared at us.

"Whatcha doin'?" Cole entered without any hesitation. "I thought there was no foreplay allowed in the living room."

"We aren't doing that." If he thought that this was foreplay, that probably meant he and Jess … no, I couldn't go there.

"Hey man." Rage nodded at Damien as he followed Jess into the room. "We've been worried about you."

"I know. I'm sorry." He strolled over to the chair farthest from the door and sat down. "I want to get this out and just say it."

"Okay." I didn't want to say too much and discourage him.

"I don't believe that Professor Shaw knows what the society does."

"Oh, come on, Damien." Cole sat in the chair directly across from him. "He's a wizard."

"You don't think I know that?" Damien ran his hands through his hair. "But he was there for me when my Dad died. That's how he became my mentor. He helped me through it."

"But …" Jess shook her head.

I connected with everyone except Damien. *Don't. Let him have his say. We can't push him too hard or he won't open up to us.*

"I promised you earlier, Raven." He didn't look like the strong trainer I'd come to know but more insecure. "I won't say anything, and I'm still in. You guys are my family, but when Professor Shaw winds up being innocent, we have to help him."

"Deal." I'd take it. For Damien's sake, I hoped Shaw proved us wrong.

Chapter Twelve

The day had finally come when I was marrying my best friend, my true mate, my other half. I couldn't believe it had come. Three years ago, I figured I'd be marrying Greg and continuing my miserable, hidden existence. I had never imagined I'd ever be happy and a freaking alpha to a pack. Greg was kind of forced on me, and I hadn't known any better to fight it. Thinking about it almost made me sick to my stomach.

"Oh my God, you look beautiful." Mom's voice surrounded me as I stood in Audrey and Matthew's room, looking out their bedroom window down into their yard. There were a few chairs that littered the yard and a large white canopy covered in white, blue-gray, and navy roses in front of the spring that touched their backyard.

Mom had arrived an hour ago, and to say things were tense was an understatement.

She marched up behind me and glanced at the mirror, taking in my wedding dress. It had a V neckline with beaded, thin straps. Lace cut-outs decorated the sides of the bodice, and it hugged my body perfectly. A small train flowed out behind me but nothing that should cause me any issues walking down the aisle.

"That dress is gorgeous." She stayed a few feet back, not comfortable getting any closer.

"Damn straight it is." Jess came back in with a small veil that she was trying to place into my hair. I wore my long dark hair in loose curls. Once again, Jess had done a fabulous job with my makeup but this time opted for a very natural look with red lipstick. "She looks like a queen."

"Let's not get too far ahead of ourselves." I arched an eyebrow at her through the mirror while she pinned the veil in my hair.

"I agree with your mother. You look beautiful." Audrey stepped next to me, placing a hand on my shoulder. "I'm so excited to be your mother-in-law."

Audrey wore a simple gray dress that hugged her curves, and her dark hair was pulled into a modest French twist. Her green eyes sparkled as she took all of us in.

"If you make me cry," Jess said as she adjusted her gray-blue strapless dress under the sheer wrap around her shoulders, "I will be upset. It's taken me all day to get this makeup perfect."

"Please, can I have a second alone with my daughter?" Mom avoided my eyes at all costs and tugged at the champagne sequined jacket that matched her A-line dress.

“Of course.” Audrey placed a comforting hand on Mom’s shoulder. “Let us know if you need anything. We’re going to head down and get ready.”

“If you hurt her, I will make you pay.” Jess stepped into my Mom’s personal space. Even though Jess was at least five inches shorter than Mom, she didn’t flinch. “I don’t care if you’re her momma.”

Mom’s eyes widen similar to a deer caught in headlights.

“Alright, Jess.” Audrey chuckled. “Let’s give them some privacy.”

Call me if you need me, girl. Jess glared another second at mom before Audrey was able to escort her out the door.

“That was unexpected.” Mom gasped and laughed at the same time.

“She’s my best friend.” That should explain it all.

“Yeah, but it’s almost as if you are a pack member she’s protecting.” Mom shook her head and laughed.

We hadn’t made it public knowledge yet that the five of us were now a pack. It’s not that we were hiding it, just that it was nobody’s damn business.

An awkward silence descended over us.

Not sure what to do, I leaned against the wall. I wanted to sit down but didn’t want to mess up my dress. Audrey’s room was large and decorated in a crisp blue color. The king-sized bed sat in the center of the room, topped with a navy blue comforter. Her room had a loveseat in the corner. It was an absolutely gorgeous room.

“Honey, I want you to know that I am happy for you.” Her dark eyes held too much emotion, so I had to look down.

“Look, I can’t do this.” This was supposed to be one of the happiest days of my life. I couldn’t let whatever had happened between us sacrifice the day. “I won’t lie. I’m glad you’re here, but please don’t push.”

She took a deep breath and nodded. “That seems fair.” She stepped closer to me, and a genuine smile crossed her face. “You do look beautiful.”

“Thanks.” I wasn’t sure what to say.

Someone pounded on the door. As soon as his cotton candy scent filled my nose, his voice filled my ears. “Oh, Ravey. What’s taking you so long?”

I glanced at the clock. “It’s barely even time to get moving.” The sun was setting, which was what we wanted. The skies were painted with blues, purples, and pinks. The perfect time.

“Well, yeah, but it feels like forever. Rage has been crabby ever since last night when you refused to see him prior to the wedding.” Cole opened the door, and his mouth dropped open. “You are fucking gorgeous.”

“Thank you.” I loved how unfiltered he was. He hadn’t bothered to censor it with my mom in the room. What you saw was what you got with him.

“If you weren’t mated to that man, I’d be sweeping you away right now.” He winked at me and hurried over, wrapping me in a huge hug. Cole linked with Rage and me. *I may not bring her down after all.*

I’m not in a joking mood. Rage’s voice was raspy mentally. *Get her ass down here.*

You do realize I’m listening too. I couldn’t help but tease him.

If you don’t hurry up, I’ll come upstairs and pick your fine ass up and bring you out here. Rage’s voice turned raspy for a whole different reason. *You wouldn’t let me sneak into your room last night.*

My body responded. *Because if we’re having a wedding, we should be traditional about it.*

He had pouted all night. Even though Cole got him to go to a bar a few minutes away, Rage had still sulked the whole time.

Come on, Ravey. Cole leaned back and winked at me. *Let’s go before the big bad pup acts up and starts peeing on everything.*

Ass. Rage growled.

“Cole, we’ll be there shortly.” Mom waved him to the door. “I need one more minute with her.”

“I won’t leave unless Raven says it’s okay.” Cole’s cold demeanor appeared in the blink of an eye. To say that my friends were less of a fan of my mother than I was would be a gross understatement.

“It’s fine.” I wanted this to be a good day and not one ruined by my parents like my engagement. “Just give me a minute.”

Cole gestured his pointer and middle finger toward his eyes and then pointed them back toward Mom. He did it once more before closing the door.

“Raven, please tell me that the vampire wasn’t mindspeaking to you.” Mom reached over and touched my arm. “Tell me I was imagining things.”

“Why should I tell you anything?” She hadn’t been an open book with me.

“You can’t tell anyone.” Something akin to fear showed in her eyes. “Do you understand?”

I wanted to lash out at her. Here she was, trying to get secrets from me and angering me on the day I wanted complete happiness. We had so many ugly things we were dealing with and working through. I refused to let Mom ruin it. I took a deep breath and looked my mother in the eyes. “Enough. It’s time to go.”

Mom startled and took a step back. “We need to talk about this.”

“You will not ruin this day for me.” I was barely able to keep my anger at bay. “If you keep pushing, I will get Cole and Jess to escort

you out."

"Okay, fine." Mom exhaled and smiled. "I'll go take my seat."

"Good, now let's go." I didn't bother to wait for her. I headed to the door and opened it. Jess and Cole were standing outside the room, ready to bust in at any second.

"Here." Jess smiled and handed me a bouquet of the same flowers that decorated the canopy. The roses were navy, blue-gray, and white with greenery sprinkled throughout. "Are you ready to get married?"

There was no doubt in my mind. "Of course."

"Let me go grab the guys." Cole turned and headed to the other side of the house.

Dad stood in the corner of the room, his eyes on me. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you." It was a strange feeling standing there, not sure whether I should hug my parents or not. I took a deep breath and closed the distance between us.

He looked good in a suit. This was the first time I'd ever seen him dressed up.

His dark hair was shorter than normal, and he tugged at his tie. "Uh … Do I get the honor of walking you down the aisle?"

"Yeah, that would be nice." I hated the distance between us, but at the end of the day, he was still my dad wanting to give me away.

It's time. Now get your ass down here. Rage's voice entered my head.

We moved to the den that butted against the back door leading to the canopy. Jess was my one and only bridesmaid, so she slowly marched down to the end of the aisle.

Dad took my hand and placed it through his arm. "Let's go."

As we entered the doorway, the music changed, and my eyes zeroed in on Rage.

His shaggy brown hair was cut shorter, and his muscles were more defined in his gray suit and white shirt with a navy tie. His warm eyes settled on me. *Damn, you're gorgeous.*

Both Dad and I began our slow march down the aisle toward Rage and our friends.

Cole and Damien were his two groomsmen. Cole smiled at me, but he kept glancing at Jess while Damien stood stiff and awkward. He moved his shoulders as if he was trying to get comfortable.

In front of Rage sat Audrey and his brother. Audrey had spent most of the morning with me, and our relationship was beginning to bloom.

On my side, it was just my mom waiting for me with a tear trailing down her cheek.

We wanted it small and intimate, which was perfect.

My feet wanted to go faster and faster to get to Rage. I was so

damn lucky he was mine.

His dad, Matthew, stood on the other side of Rage with a huge smile on his face. He was the officiant of the wedding as he was the alpha of the pack here.

Even though this appeared as a wedding, it was also a celebration of our mate bond. It was a short and sweet ceremony that every wolf prays to have. My dad stopped in front of Rage and turned toward me, wrapping his arms around me in a hug. “I’m so proud of you.” He then took my hand and placed it in Rage’s. “Take care of her.”

“I will.” Rage’s chocolate eyes never left my face, and when our hands touched, the bond’s comforting buzz came to life.

Out of the corner of my eye, I noticed wolves appear around the property’s edge. It appeared that Matthew’s pack came in support of our ceremony.

Matthew cleared his voice and took a few steps closer to us. “I’m honored today to be part of this blessing, not only because I’m part of a cherished bond but to be the alpha who performs this ancient ceremony for my son and daughter.”

When his dad agreed to perform the ceremony, I was surprised since Rage had left the pack. But there was no hesitation on his part. To know they were so supportive of us even though we refused to join their pack meant the world to me. Family should always be on their children’s side.

“Even though their bond is already strong and true, this will solidify it in the most sacred way.” He leaned over and picked up a silver cup with the initial J etched into it. A small amount of soot sat in the bottom. “The first act is the exchanging of promises which is permanent and cannot be undone. So Raven, do you vow to love your mate and be there for him at all times?”

I nodded my head. “Of course.”

“Rage, do you promise to love your mate and be there for her at all times?” Matthew grinned, already knowing the answer.

“Damn straight.” Rage winked at me and took a step closer.

“Then please show your affirmation of words.” Matthew stepped closer, holding the cup nearer to us. “This soot should be placed over the bite marks, making it rise to the skin so everyone knows you are claimed.”

Rage leaned over and brushed his fingertips on my cheek. He lowered his mouth to my neck right underneath my ear and kissed. Next, his teeth scratched where his lips had been.

My breathing picked up, and his earthy scent filled my nose.

“Ready?” He asked.

“Yes.” I closed my eyes, waiting for his bite.

“I love you.” His teeth sunk in, and the magic inside me began to

swirl.

"Are you okay?" His voice was raspy as he leaned back and checked on me.

"More than okay." I hadn't expected the ceremony to change our bond at all, but I was wrong.

Rage dipped his finger into the soot and began running it over my wound. It was slightly cool to the touch and soothing to the torn flesh.

"Now, Raven, it's your turn." Matthew motioned to Rage.

I reached over and loosened his tie, removing it from his suit. I unbuttoned his first four buttons and pulled his shirt away from his neck. Just like him, I kissed the spot I was going to mark. Then I bit down.

As I pulled away, Rage's warm chocolate eyes captured mine. He watched me as I gathered soot on my finger, and then I turned his head so his neck was easier to get to.

I smeared on the soot, making sure each indentation was covered. Our bond grew, and our connection became stronger.

"And for our human part of the ceremony, Rage and Raven will exchange rings so they are committed in both forms." Matthew placed Rage's wedding band in my palm. "Raven will go first."

The ring was made of white gold and an infinity sign was engraved on the top. I placed it on his ring finger and smiled.

"Here you go." Matthew placed my band in Rage's palm.

My ring was white gold with an infinity symbol similar to Rage's. The one difference was that the symbol was made of small diamonds and fit to my engagement ring.

When Rage placed it on my finger, a huge smile filled his face. "You're stuck with me."

"Not if we kill you." Cole gave me a thumbs up. "Say the word; that's all it takes."

And here I was, thinking that Cole was going to behave.

"Threatening murder on their wedding day can't be a good omen." Audrey giggled. "So let's hold off until the ceremony is over at least."

"Well, now it's my honor to present Mr. and Mrs. Jackson." Matthew stepped back, and the wolves began to howl. Just like that, our ceremony was done.

THE NEXT MORNING, I snuck out of bed, trying not to wake Rage. It was crazy to think that now not only was I legally married but officially bonded to my true mate. It strengthened our bond, which we hadn't expected it to do.

I was surprised to find Jess already awake and at the table.

"Well, look what the cat dragged in." Jess grinned and winked. "I

thought you'd be sleeping still.

"I'm not the one who partied all night." I headed over to the coffee pot and poured myself a large cup. "Did you sleep?"

"Yeah, we fae don't need as much as you shifters." She glanced back at her iPad, scrolling through it.

"When we get back, the cullings are going to start." I promised myself that I wouldn't freak out about them until after our ceremony. Though now, that stress lingered on my face.

"Girl, we've got that." Jess smiled even though it didn't reach her eyes.

I leaned over and read one of the headlines. **Invisible Spells**. "What are you searching?"

"You know what." Jess took a sip of her coffee and sighed. "I'm worried about you seeing that guy at the restaurant."

"At least I haven't seen him since then." I tried not to think about it.

"You haven't done another mission for you know who." Jess clicked on the article. "So you can't be sure yet."

Footsteps entered the kitchen, and the familiar scent hit my nose. "Why is my wife not in my bed?"

"Because she needed coffee." Jess pointed at my cup. "You know how she is."

"Do you think that's what it's about?" I hadn't thought about that.

"What are you guys talking about?" Rage came over and stole a sip of my drink.

"I'm worried about the invisible guy." Jess lifted her iPad up. "It says only the most powerful can do that. So there had to be a reason you saw him."

"What brought this up so suddenly?" Rage frowned and glanced out the window.

"It was on my mind last night, and I couldn't shake it." She scrolled through the article. "One person suggests drawing the person in order to weaken the person's veil."

"That's something I can do." That kind of made sense. If we knew where they were and knew what they looked like, maybe it was some subliminal thing.

Rage stepped over to the far kitchen drawer and opened it, pulling out a pencil and paper. "Here you go."

I took the tools and began drawing the man to the best of my abilities. "He was mainly bald but still had some hair around the bottom." I focused on my creation for a minute and then heard Rage take in a gasp of air.

"Are you okay?" I glanced up from my drawing.

His face was paler than normal, and he took the drawing and

stared. “That looks identical to my grandfather’s nephew, George.”

“So one of your family members is stalking Raven?” Jess frowned and shook her head.

Great, now I was seeing someone who was tied to Rage’s extended family. This proved what I’d been worrying about all along. The society was larger, probably even bigger than we were beginning to realize. It was going to take years, if not decades, to bring it all down. We had to focus on baby steps for now. The first step had to be getting them out of the academy. We didn’t need the strongest supernaturals signing up for their mission.

Chapter Thirteen

"Wow, I wasn't expecting to see any of you up." Matthew smiled at Rage and me then nodded at Jess.

It was surprising how different he treated Jess and Cole because they weren't shifters. He did treat Damien a little warmer even though he was a bear. At least he was cordial with them and had allowed them to stay here, but I was thinking it was more due to Audrey than anything else.

"We'll sleep when we're dead." Jess smiled brightly at him. "At least that's what my parents say."

"Hey, I've been meaning to ask you about the Jackson business." Rage's body tensed ever so slightly.

Do you think he's involved? Other than his biases against non-shifters, he seemed like a good guy.

I don't know. His words sat hard on my heart.

"What about it, son?" He poured a cup of coffee and pulled his phone out of his pocket. "Dammit, George and Jonathan have been trying to call."

"Do you want me to walk down to Jonathan's house and see what's up?" Rage grabbed a banana from the fruit bowl sitting in the middle of the island.

"It's not that Jonathan." Dad scrolled through his messages and frowned. "It's Shaw and George." He frowned and shook his head. "I wish Dad would've left the company to me instead of George. Guys, I'm going to go into work. If I don't get back in time before you all leave, let me say, I'm honored to have a new addition to our family." He set his coffee on the island and made his way over to me, wrapping his arms around me. "I'd always hoped Rage would have a true mate, so I'm as happy as he is."

"Thank you." I hugged him back. "It's nice to be part of the family."

"Where are you heading to?" Audrey entered the room with Mom beside her. "It's the weekend."

"Apparently, there is an important situation that has come up, and George needs me to meet him at the office." He headed over to her and kissed her cheek. "And Jonathan keeps calling too. I'll call him back on my way to the office."

"Use the Bluetooth." She patted his arm. "See you tonight."

"Why the hell is Professor Shaw calling you?" Even more suspicion filled Rage's eyes.

"What's with the twenty questions?" Matthew paused and

examined his son. “You know I graduated from Bloodshed with Jonathan.”

“That doesn’t explain why he’s calling.” Rage stood again, staring his father down.

“And that is none of your business.” There was a tense tone to his words. “Now, I’m on my way.” He brushed past Rage and headed toward the garage door.

“Bye, Matthew.” Mom gave him a tight smile. “It was good seeing you again.”

“You too, Liz.” He pulled her into a hug and sighed. “You better not disappear again.”

“Well, I don’t think it’s possible.” She snorted as her eyes landed on me. “My daughter married your son. Something we used to always hope would happen.”

“Maybe it was always meant to be.” Audrey patted my shoulder as she headed by. “I’m lucky to have an amazing daughter who has parents I like.”

“Bye, I’ll be back soon,” Matthew called as he headed toward the garage.

My phone went off. I swiped the button on the screen, and my heart caught in my chest.

Your first culling is scheduled for tonight. Please make your way to the gym by seven. Hope you’re ready, my dear.

A door slammed shut, and footsteps came running down the stairs, heading my way. *Did you get the text?* Damien’s voice was laced with tension.

“Are you fucking serious?” Rage had seen the text, and his face began turning a deep shade of red.

“What’s wrong?” Mom hurried over and grabbed the phone from my hands.

“What the hell?” Any nice feelings I had toward her were gone.

Damien and my dad ran into the room together.

“Liz, what’s wrong?” Dad hurried over to us.

“No, I thought it wouldn’t happen.” Mom shook her head and huffed. “Raven, you can’t go back.”

“You don’t get to make that call.” I couldn’t believe the audacity of the woman.

“I agree with her.” Rage shook his head and growled. “You aren’t going. I told her that if I stayed you were exempt.”

“Excuse you?” I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. I reached over and grabbed my phone from my mother. *Cole, get your ass down here.*

Whoa, what’s wrong, Mrs. Jackson? Cole’s words seemed sleepy in my head.

You're taking me back to Bloodshed, pronto. I had to get out of here and away from these dingleberries.

"Now, Liz." Dad approached her and grabbed her arm. "She's a married woman now. That's for him and her to figure out." He nodded toward Rage and me.

"Don't worry. She won't be fighting." Rage grabbed his phone and began typing on it.

"Rage." Audrey's voice had a warning in it.

"No, don't get involved." Rage shook his head. "I'm calling Isadora right now."

"Don't even." I stepped in front of him. "This is something I need to do."

"Oh, boy." Cole's voice filled the kitchen. "What's going on here?"

"Rage thinks he can talk his way out of me being part of the culling." If I knew this was going to happen, I might not have been so giddy yesterday. "Apparently, he tried to bribe my way out."

"Why?" Cole's brow furrowed. "She's a badass. I hate to admit it, but I bet she can beat my ass."

"Are you serious?" Rage scowled and shook his head. "There is no way in hell she's going to be part of that. Do you not remember how we barely came out of it?"

"Yea, but it's not your choice." Damien frowned at Rage and took a few steps toward him. "It's her culling, not yours."

"He's right." It hurt that he didn't think I'd survive, and worst of all, he was acting like my parents. He was trying to take my choice away. "And I'm going to do this." I glanced at Cole. "We've gotta go."

"Aye, Aye, Captain." He saluted and pulled the keys from his pocket. "Your wish is my command." He bowed at his waist. "After you m'lady."

"If she's the Captain, then I'm the Lieutenant." Jess clapped her hands. "And I'm with you."

"Come on, Jess." Damien nodded to the door. "Let's follow the Private to the car."

"Hey, now." Cole lifted his hands in the air. "I'm not going to be showing any privates with you around."

"Dumbass, that's a rank in the army." Damien shoved him toward the car. "I'd never ask to see that from you."

"I think thou protest too much." Cole pulled his pants up and tightened the notch one more latch tighter. "But I don't swing that way. So, sorry man."

"Just nod and smile." Jess patted Damien on the shoulder and grabbed Cole's arm. "Let's go." She glanced at me and then the group beside me. "We'll be waiting."

"You'll be stuck out there a long damn time then." Rage's jaw was

clenched, and he was breathing fast.

"No, they won't." I was damn tired of people thinking they could make decisions for me. "You're welcome to come. I'd rather have you by my side, but I'll be fine on my own if it comes to that." For some reason, I had to be part of the culling. Something in my gut told me that.

"Raven, no." Mom stepped up next to Rage. "Listen to your mate, please. To me."

"This is something I have to do." I had to stay calm and keep my head on straight. "The decision isn't for either of you to make. It's mine."

"She's right, Liz." Dad sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. "We can't protect her anymore."

"I'm sorry, but I've got to go." I went to kiss Rage on the cheek, but he moved out of the way. His betrayal hit deep. Even though my heart was breaking, I held my head up high. "I'll see you guys later."

Audrey marched over to me and wrapped her arms around my neck. "Don't worry. He'll come around." Her words were only a breath in the air though.

I sure hoped so. I refused to meet my mother's gaze but touched my dad's shoulder as I passed by. At least he was on my side. I forced myself not to lag in hopes Rage came to his senses. I needed to be decisive, and if he couldn't support me, well it was better if I went down that road alone.

As I was heading to the door, Stone appeared in front of me.

"What's the emergency?" Stone arched his eyebrow as I rushed by him.

"I'm sorry. I've got to go." I turned around and smiled at him. "Tonight is my first culling."

"Damn, I'm jealous." He saluted me. "Good luck."

"See you." I reached the door and stepped outside.

As the door shut behind me, I leaned back and took a deep breath. I was a hot mess inside, but I had to get my act together. At least the other three were completely supportive, so I wouldn't be alone.

Cole's red Audi pulled in front of me. It was time to go.

"Come on, girl. Are you ready to go?" Jess called from the backseat. "I made Damien sit up front so we can talk strategy."

"Don't worry." Cole turned his body so he was talking to me through the open windows as well. "I'll contribute too. We've got you."

It was time to go.

WE REACHED the Academy a few hours before go-time. Rage never

called me, which hurt worse. I got that he wasn't thrilled about the culling. However, it wasn't his choice, and it was something I had to do.

It hurt as we walked back into mine and Jess's dorm. A large piece of my puzzle was missing, and I wasn't quite sure what was going to happen.

I glanced over at Cole and Jess, who were sitting on the couch.

"So, what should I expect tonight?" I was the one who hadn't gone through this, so any insight would be great.

"Don't lose focus even if the crowd gets loud." Jess frowned. "It's easy to let them overtake you."

"Is that what happened between you and that fae girl?" I still never got the full story out of her.

"Oh, Kim?" Jess frowned and sunk back in the seat. "She's the one who was sort of destined to come here from my kingdom and lost her shit when she found out I was coming here too."

"So preppy stuck up girl couldn't handle another star?" Cole tapped his lips with his fingertips. "I mean, we're awesome. Awesome just radiates off us."

"What we need to do is go over our strategy again." Damien strolled out of the kitchen with a granola bar and water. "I talked to Isadora. It appears you're going against another wolf shifter tonight."

"They always start out with the same race." Cole shrugged. "It shouldn't be a surprise. So it'll be like fighting Nate but without him being that large."

"At least there's that." Damien tried to make a joke.

"Dude, that was bad." Cole shook his head. "Let me handle the witty commentary."

I glanced at my phone, hoping I missed a text, call, something from Rage. Only, there was nothing but a reminder that the culling would start in thirty minutes. "We better get going."

"Yeah, we need to get there a few minutes early." Damien scarfed down the rest of his food.

"Hell yeah." Cole pumped his fist in the air. "We gotta get the best seats to see our girl kick some ass. We need to be so close blood splatters on us."

Of course, Cole would take it to that level. "Let me go change, and then I'll be ready." I forced myself to leave the phone in the den. I was obsessively checking it and not because of the time.

I slipped on a black sports bra and tank top with some black exercise pants. I needed to be comfortable so I could move fluidly. Needing my long hair out of my way, I grabbed a hairbrush and braided my hair haphazardly. As I glanced in the mirror, I saw Rage's bite, clear as day. That should have been comforting, but at this point,

it wasn't.

Taking a deep breath, I let myself fall apart for a minute. If I didn't allow my emotions to flow, it might distract me from the fight itself.

"Raven, we need to go," Damien called as he knocked gently on the door. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah, I'm coming." I wiped underneath my eyes, hoping to hide any trace of tears. I had my second, and now it was game time.

THERE WAS ALREADY a small crowd gathered where the fight was taking place. Apparently, I was fighting the guy who glared at me as I made my way down to the front.

There was a black mat in the center with a fence around it. There was no getting out of it since the top was covered in a wire grate with spikes. There was one large door in the center that had a lock.

"Miss Wright, it's good to see you made it." Isadora nodded and pointed to four seats beside her. "I assumed if I didn't save these seats, your crew would cause a stink."

"That's Mrs. Jackson now." Rage's raspy voice came from behind me.

I swung around and faced my mate. "You're here?" It came off as a question even though I had meant it as a statement.

"Of course I am." Rage glared at Isadora. "We had a deal."

"Let's talk outside for a moment." Isadora stood and pointed at Rage and me, motioning for us to follow her.

"Don't worry, I'll keep our seats," Cole yelled after us.

We stepped through the door, into the training area that Damien and I used for our practice now. Isadora scanned the area to make sure we were alone.

"Apparently, congratulations are in order." Isadora rolled her eyes and huffed. "I wish you would have told me before it happened. We have to figure out what that means now."

"No need to worry." Rage shook her concern off. "We're fine staying at Raven and Jess's place. What I'm wanting to know is why the fuck is Raven in the culling?"

"Well, believe it or not, Mr. Jackson, Jonathan asked me why the hell she wasn't included in this year's culling. He asked if I was taking Raven under my wing. We can't compromise her and make it appear as if I favor her." Isadora frowned and pulled at her typical jacket. "So I had to tell him it was an oversight. We cannot risk your place in the society. So he suggested she fight against Rick as the first opponent to see if it bothered me."

"Yes, we know you can't hint that you may approve of us." Rage clenched his hands into fists. "I don't like this."

“Neither do I.” Isadora hissed at him. “But now, we have to play the game. He’s acting too interested in my relationship with all of you, so we have to play this right. Also, for her to stay in the society, she has to continue to prove she’s strong and can handle herself in any fight.”

“If she gets hurt, I will blame you.” Rage narrowed his eyes and glared.

“I’m here.” I hated being talked about as if I wasn’t in the room. “And I’m fine with this. Damien has been an amazing trainer. I want to earn respect the same way everyone else does.”

“Smart girl.” Isadora smiled in approval. “I think that’s the smartest thing I’ve ever heard you say. So now I’m going back in there before Jonathan comes looking for me.” She turned on her heels and marched back into the fighting room.

There was a moment of silence that passed between us. After a few seconds, I chose to be the one who talked first. “I’m surprised you came.”

“At first, I wasn’t going to.” Rage’s jaw clenched, and he took a deep breath. “But damn, how could I not be here. I’m sorry about earlier.”

Now, *that* I wasn’t expecting. “I have to do this.”

“Look, I know.” Rage reached over and took my hand in his. “I’m scared of losing you. That’s all. I acted like an asshole, and I’m sorry. I’m glad you left my ass there so I would wake up.”

“It was hard.” I think that was possibly the hardest thing I had ever done. “I’m glad you’re here now.”

“And I get to watch my girl kick that dick’s ass.” He leaned over and pressed his lips against mine.

“I don’t think this will get Raven ready for the fight.” Professor Shaw’s voice startled me.

I despised how this man always seemed to appear out of thin air. “Don’t worry. I’m ready to kick ass.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Professor Shaw chuckled as if it was some kind of joke. “Rage, please tell your dad to call me when you speak to him again. I’m having a hard time getting ahold of him.”

“He had to go in to work earlier, for some reason, so that’s probably why.” Rage took my hand and pulled me closer to him. “Anything I can help with?”

“No, it’s important business.” He huffed and glanced at the clock. “Raven, you need to be heading back in. It’s time for the fight.”

“Important business” rang in my ears. Could Rage’s father somehow be a part of the society? He disliked other races, so that could be a possibility. However, I didn’t want to come out and accuse Matthew. There had to be a way we could find out more information,

but it would have to wait until later. Right now, I had to go fight for my life.

Chapter Fourteen

When we walked back into the fight room, I couldn't believe my eyes. The place was packed. The fifty or so seats had already been occupied, and people were standing around, taking up all of the empty spaces, crowding the sides.

I didn't expect there to be so many people. I had the common sense to not say that out loud.

This is one of the things that the academy offers for entertainment. Rage took my hand and gently squeezed. *Don't focus on them. You have to focus on the dipshit that's staring you down.*

He wasn't lying. That guy had the predator gleam in his eyes. He pulled off his shirt, which didn't do him any favors. He was lean with smaller muscles compared to Rage and Damien. *Who is this guy?*

The one who wants to make you bleed. A low growl emanated from Rage's throat. *Don't put a name to him. Don't make him more of a person. If you want to survive this, think of him as an obstacle you have to get through.*

It was jaded, the way he was talking, but if I was going to earn respect, I had to do this. *Fine.*

Ravey, you're back. Cole gave me two thumbs up. *I can't wait until you annihilate this guy. When he goes down for the count, tell him I send my best.*

This isn't a game, Cole. Damien looked as if he might slap him.

Oh, come on. Cole glanced in the cage once more at my opponent. *She's kicked asses harder than his.*

I'm with Cole. Jess winked at me. *You've totally got this.*

Going in arrogant will get you killed. Damien stood and headed over to me. *He seems to favor his right side. I've been watching him, and anything he does has been right-handed.*

This is why Damien was a freaking excellent coach. *Got it.*

Rage closed his eyes and took a deep breath. *I love you.* He opened them back up and leaned down, kissing my lips. *If he hurts you too badly, I will kill him.*

"I've got this." I wrapped my arms around him and then pulled myself away, moving toward the entrance to the cage.

Professor Shaw appeared at the cage door. Leaning close to my ear, he breathed in deeply. "May the best shifter win." He pulled back, and a smile tugged at his lips like it was almost a threat.

If I wanted to keep his respect, I had to appear nonchalant. "Get his gurney ready."

"I have no doubt he'll need it." Professor Shaw motioned for me to

go in. “It’s finally time to show those fools I’ve been right about you all along.”

That wasn’t something I had expected to hear from him. He was actually rooting for me.

“Chatty Cathy, why don’t you get your hot ass in here so I can pummel you and move on to the next level?” The guy raised his finger, beckoning me.

There were three levels this year, meaning three fights in total for each of us. We had twelve of us fighting for a chance to stay. The ones who won the first level got to stay at the academy. The two who racked up the most points got a chance for the finale. The last one established the strongest of the class. Depending on the class size, there could be as many as three top winners, which was the case for the guys. Apparently, my recruited class was one of the smallest the academy had seen in years, which made winning the last round even more of a statement.

Instead of waiting for Professor Shaw to open the door, I yanked it open and waltzed in with a carefree grin on my face. He was expecting to kick my ass mainly because I was a girl. So I needed to make him irrationally angry. “Hey, dickhead. I’m ready.”

“Finally decided to come meet your maker.” The guy's smile dropped as he glared at me. “Soon, you’ll be calling me God.”

“Nah, I think I’ll pass on that one.” I winked at him and relaxed, pretending I had no care in the world. “Might be best to stick with dickhead unless you want the name changed. Maybe you’d prefer pansy.”

Look, she’s channeling me. Cole’s exuberant voice filled my head. *Let me know if you need some help with comebacks. I’ve got you.*

Of course, that would make his day.

“You stupid bitch.” He growled as his whole body tensed. “You’re going to be begging for your life before this is all over.”

At this point, he was acting like he might stay over there and hurl insults at me. I needed him to be the first one to attack though. He was arrogant, and I needed to play that to my advantage. “You must be all talk, seeing as you’re staying over there all by yourself.” Despite every fiber in my body being on the defense, I made a point to turn my back to him. *Let me know if he charges.*

We’ve got you, boo. Jess winked at me. *You’d better get ready because his face is turning red.*

Yeah, I pretty much told him, “Fuck you,” and I’m not scared by doing this.

He’s moving. Rage’s tone sounded pained in my mind. *You need to turn back around.*

I closed my eyes and opened up my senses. This was something

Damien had made me do a while ago, helping me connect more with my wolf.

The guy's footsteps were surprisingly light, but I could still make out the slight patters of them on the floor.

Duck now. Damien's coaching voice rang in my head.

Trusting him completely, I dropped to the ground and felt the whoosh of a fist that had been meant for the back of my head. Instead of hitting me, he lost his balance and tripped over my body, landing on his face.

A few loud cheers from the audience hit my ears.

Great, they were excited to watch blood spill which didn't surprise me. This was what every one of us looked forward to. A graduation of sorts even though Cole, Damien, and Rage had stayed around longer. Evidently, they had passed their culling before they came and recruited me.

The guy jumped to his feet, and I watched as a deep bruise already began forming on his cheek. Without saying a word, he leaned back and kicked his foot out, aiming for my chest.

I dodged his leg and directly punched his family jewels. I spun around and backed away a few feet as he landed hard on the ground.

I stood straight up and moved a few feet closer to him. "How are you feeling down there?"

"Don't worry. You'll be the one down here soon." His face strained as he growled out the words.

Wanting this to just end, I aimed my kick at his face. I swung as hard as I could, and I hit nothing but air. I almost fell, but a strong arm grabbed my waist.

"You're going to pay now." His lips were next to my ear. "See you in Hell." He lifted my body high and was getting ready to drop me.

"Rage, sit down now," Isadora yelled at my mate. "You may not interfere."

Get the hell out of here. Damien yelled. *You're going to get her more hurt.*

I couldn't focus on that. I had to focus on winning this damn fight.

I've got him. Jess stood and grabbed Rage's arm, pulling him out the door.

Thank God, she got him to leave.

As the guy dropped me, I hooked my arm around his neck and flipped him over my body as I fell, hitting the ground hard. Something popped, but I didn't have any time to think about it.

I jumped back onto my feet and spun around, waiting on him. "Come on."

The guy slowly began to pick himself up off the floor and took a limped step toward me. He favored his right side which was a good

thing. His strong hand had to compensate for his weakened left side.

You should be able to take him down this time. Damien stood from his seat and hurried next to the cage.

"Hey, you can't help her." One of the guy's friends called out to him. "You aren't allowed to talk to them once they are in the fight."

"I'm not going to talk to her." Damien scoffed. *Though that doesn't mean I won't mind link with you.*

Look at Damien. Cole jumped from his seat and stood next to him. *He's getting all sneaky.*

Guys, I've got to concentrate. They were going to distract me if they kept it up. They were trying to help, but damn. They were going to make me mess up at this rate.

"What are you waiting for?" The guy taunted me. "Are you afraid to charge?"

"Aw, are you too hurt?" The jackass thought reverse psychology was going to work on me. "Maybe you should bow out now."

"There's no way in hell you're going to win." He hurried at me but limped with each step he took. His face was red with either pain or rage.

I had to forget about my back and win. There was no telling what else he would do to me at this point, especially if he got the advantage.

He raced toward me, and I knew what I had to do. I had to make him think I wouldn't dodge him.

I raised my hands in the air, acting as if I were going to punch him.

A smug smile crossed his face like he had me exactly where he wanted me. He lowered his body as though he was going to grab my waist and make me fall back.

There was no way in hell that was going to happen. At the last second, I spun around and elbowed him in the back of the neck. He went down with a thud.

The crowd went wild.

I SOMEHOW MADE it into the girls' locker room before I fell apart. My back was killing me. It hurt to move.

Jess entered the room, and when her eyes landed on me, she grimaced. "Girl, he got you good, didn't he?"

"That would be an understatement. Granted it was my own damn fault for dropping both of us." However, that was the only option I could see at the time, and it had worked.

"Don't get me wrong, I had one hell of a fight. I wasn't cut from the school, but I hadn't been an elite either." She stepped behind me

and lifted my shirt up. “But I didn’t get even half the pain you’re probably in.”

“No bones are popping out, are they?” I wouldn’t know what it meant for me if there were. Shifters could heal quickly, but there were some things we couldn’t bounce back from. Death was one of them.

The door to the locker room opened, and I hopped to my feet, yanking my shirt back down. No one but my pack was going to know how bad I was hurt.

A sweet smell hit me, and I wasn’t surprised when Jordan’s face appeared. “Hey, Raven.”

We hadn’t talked much since the whole Nate investigation, so I wasn’t sure where we stood. One thing was for sure—I couldn’t trust her. “Hey, how are you doing?”

“Not great.” Her normal snotty attitude was gone, and there were dark circles under her eyes. Her gaze landed on Jess, and she huffed. “Why am I not surprised she’s here?”

“Because I’m her best friend.” Jess flipped her hair over her shoulders and faced her dead-on. “You got a problem with that?”

“No, but some others do.” Jordan glanced at me. “Can I have a moment alone with you?”

That was odd. Not only was she asking, but she was doing it nicely. I had to glance at both her hands to make sure she didn’t have a gun or something ready to attack me with. There had to be an ulterior motive. “Yeah, but just a minute.”

But … Jess crossed her arms ready to fight me.

Please. Stand outside, and I’ll call you if I need any help. No one aside from Luna knew about our pack, so it was to our advantage.

Fine, but I’m telling Rage. She dropped her hands and sighed. “I’m watching you, leech.” Jess stared at her until she hurried down the short hallway to the door.

Jordan chuckled when we were finally alone. “I never thought she fit in here until she became friends with you. She finally had a supporter.”

“Okay, you’re freaking me out.” She almost seemed like a person. “What’s the catch?”

“I don’t blame you for not trusting me.” She sighed and headed over to the bench that was in front of me. “Look, today is my last day here.”

“What?” Now, I didn’t expect that. “Why?”

“Yeah.” She sat on the bench and took a deep breath. “Let’s say that The Elites aren’t quite what they seem. They’ve officially decided that I had something to do with that mermaid girl and Nate disappearing, which is preposterous. But that’s the final call, which means I’m blacklisted. I’m disappearing before I wind up dead.”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I kinda felt bad, knowing that it had been pinned on her. "Is there anything I can do?"

She snorted and shook her head. "I never imagined I'd be sitting here with you, having a heart to heart discussion. I'm sorry I was such a bitch to you. To be honest, I was jealous of you. I mean, you come in here and have Rage, Cole, and Damien eating out of your hand. It was too simple when all of us had tried to get there and failed."

"I never intended to have them eat out of my hand." I hated those words. It made me sound manipulative and narcissistic. "I came here so disconnected from my wolf I thought there had to be some mistake. Maybe that's what you and the other girls are missing. Being yourself."

"It's easy to criticize us, but you don't know what it was like growing up when your parents expected you to be the best and only surround yourself with the best." She closed her eyes and held her hands out. "That's not why I came here though."

Maybe this is where the knife appeared. "So why did you?" Let's get this over with. I wanted to go home and to bed.

"Be careful." Jordan scanned the room and leaned toward me. "They see more than you realize."

My stomach began to churn. This could easily be a scene in a horror movie.

"Ugh." She huffed and reached into her pocket and handed me a card. "They aren't what they seem, and if you ever need me, need help, don't hesitate to call." She stood and hurried to the hallway leading to the door. Right when she reached it, she paused again. "If I could do it all over again, it would've been nice to be friends. So this is the last piece of advice I'll give you. They aren't thrilled with your mix of friends." She gave me a sad smile then spun around, disappearing down the hall.

For some reason, that last part didn't appear to be advice. It almost sounded as if she was giving me a warning.

Chapter Fifteen

As we made our way to the cafeteria, I couldn't believe that twelve hours ago, I had been in so much pain. Rage wrapped me in his arms, and even going to the bathroom had been difficult because he wanted to carry me everywhere.

After a lot of coaxing from Cole, I decided to take a sip of his blood for its healing abilities. He wanted me to drink from his wrist, but there was no way I could do that. Rage was close to coming unglued after seeing my injury. I didn't want to risk upsetting him any more than he already was, so I made Cole drip some into a cup. After I took that sip, I was glad I didn't drink from the tap. I'd forgotten how delicious his blood tasted.

Within thirty minutes, I was back to my normal, pain-free self.

"See, I told you it would work." Cole winked at me. "But you are on a little bit of a high. It'll wear off by tonight."

"I'm kind of glad." Even though I felt amazing, it made me feel invincible, and no one's life was truly that certain.

When we entered the cafeteria, the guy who I'd beat up last night was sitting all alone. A few other students were laughing and pointing at him.

"What the hell is going on?" I stopped in my tracks and glanced at Rage.

"No one wants to be around him since he lost." Rage scowled in the guy's direction. "I want to kill him. He hurt you."

"In all honesty, I did it to myself." I was the one who had dropped both him and me. "So, growl at me."

"That's not how this works, Raven." Rage tugged me into him. "It would defeat the point if I hurt you."

"Let's not have bedroom talk here, okay?" Jess strutted toward the buffet line. "And dude, I'm starving."

"You're welcome." Cole winked at her.

"She said no bedroom talk." Damien frowned at Cole. "Didn't you hear her?"

"Oh, she meant it for them." Cole patted Damien's shoulder.

"No, she didn't specify." Damien smacked him in the back of the head. "So that meant you as well."

At times like these, everything felt normal. As though we weren't in a school that inherently forced everyone's claws out, striving for the top positions. Since I began attending this school, I truly understood what the name Bloodshed meant. It wasn't just physical blood. It included the metaphorical blood that was spilled by

everyone stabbing each other in the back. Somehow, someway, we had made a group that supported each other. Maybe it was because we were all on the same level. Who knew really, but I wasn't going to question it.

"Hey, Raven." Another wolf shifter called out as I passed by her. "Are you going to be around later?"

Normally, everyone tried to avoid talking to me. Why was this girl all of a sudden interested in where I'd be? "Uh, yeah."

"Great, maybe we could hang out." The girl tossed her dirty blonde hair over her shoulder and smiled at me. "You can bring your man along."

"No, uh-uh." Jess walked over, carrying her plate overflowing with French toast and Danishes. "You don't get to be her friend now. You had your chance."

"What?" The girl startled back as if she had been slapped. "But …"

"No, buts." Jess handed Rage her tray and grabbed my hand, tugging me toward the food line. "You had your chance, so back off."

"Tell her how you really feel." I couldn't help the giggle that escaped.

"A few people are going to want to be friends with you now that you won your first fight." Jess wrinkled her nose in disgust. "With friends, you should never have to prove your worth."

"And that's," I said as I tugged her toward me, "why you have nothing to worry about." Jess never had friends before I came along because her family was brand new to the academy.

"Fine." Jess stomped and rolled her eyes. "Let me get my food from your man, who is still surprised that I handed him my plate."

Hey, let's go sit with the guy who I fought last night. It was wrong that he was getting shunned.

Why? He'll be gone by the end of the week. Jess stopped and hissed. "What the hell are you doing?"

I turned around to find Rage stuffing his face with one of her Danishes.

"You gave me a plate." He lifted the plate higher so that she couldn't reach it. "That means it's fair game."

"No, that's not true." Jess narrowed her eyes and pointed at the shifter who had tried to be friendly. "That wench was trying to steal my best friend, so I had to get Raven away from her."

"Still my food now." Rage winked at her. "Thanks for making it for me."

"It doesn't have any bacon." Jess jumped, trying to reach it. "Your wolf will be angry."

"Ah, thanks for your concern, but I'll steal some bacon off Raven's plate." He chuckled as she jumped like a small kid trying to get

something from her much taller parents.

I'm glad he said that. I grabbed twice as much bacon to put on my plate. Otherwise, he and I would be fighting before breakfast was over.

"That's it." Jess stared at her plate. Rage lifted it into the air and brought it back down to her hands.

"Oh, well." He shrugged. "I still got this." He took a huge bite of the Danish.

A small smile tugged at her lips. She lifted her right hand and jerked it forward.

The Danish hit Rage in the face, leaving all of the apple topping and icing behind. "Well played."

I loved that girl. I grabbed a couple of extra napkins and made my way back to Rage. "Here you go."

"Thanks." Rage grumbled as he wiped the goo off his face. "Is it gone?"

There was a huge blob of apple still on his forehead. "You may want to go to the bathroom." I had to bite the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing.

"That bad." He sighed and scowled at Jess. "I'll be back."

"Hey, you asked for it." She held her free hand in front of her face. "This was a consequence of your nepotism."

"Are you going to disagree with her?" Cole laughed as he joined us. "I'd kinda like to see you do it."

"Hell, no." He pushed past Cole and headed toward the men's restroom.

"You are amazing." Cole's blue eyes shined so brightly. "That was epic."

Damien headed our way from the food bar. "You guys are making a scene."

"No, we're having fun." Cole glanced back toward the men's restroom. "I know that concept is foreign to you, but you should try it at least once."

"Whatever." He began heading to our normal table.

Seriously, let's have breakfast with that guy I fought last night. It was the right thing to do. Not only was he not graduating, but he was being ridiculed too.

That made Damien stop in his tracks. He turned around with his forehead wrinkled. *Are you serious?*

Of course, I am. Being a leader wasn't always about beating someone up, it was about doing what's best for everyone. Besides, everyone picking on him was fueling their self-worth in the worst possible ways.

Not wasting any more time, I headed straight toward the guy. I

needed to learn his name. It almost seemed insulting to not know it by now.

Hot damn, she was being serious. Cole chuckled in my head. *She's going to blow everyone's mind. I'm so in.*

The guy heard our approach, and he turned around to face my direction. Panic appeared in his eyes.

I guessed it made sense when the four of us were heading in his toward him. "Hey, do you mind if we sit with you?"

There was still a burn mark on his face where his head had hit the ground in the cage, and I could finally tell his eyes were a dark hazel.

"Look, I already lost horribly to you." He held up both hands in surrender. "I don't need to be embarrassed a second time."

"No, honestly, I was hoping we could sit with you today." I held my hand out and smiled. "I'm Raven."

"Yeah, everyone already knows that." He looked behind me as if he was searching for someone. "Is your mate going to kill me?"

Oh, he was worried about Rage. That didn't surprise me. "No, he's too busy washing icing off his nose." I refused to ask a second time, so I headed over and sat across from him. "I hate that you know my name and I don't know yours."

"It figures." He chuckled, but there was no mirth in his eyes. "I'm Rufus."

I wasn't expecting that. "Well, it's nice to meet you. I hate that I didn't know until after our fight."

Whispers pulled my attention away from him. The group closest to our table, which surprisingly included Madison, was watching us closely.

"Just ignore them." Cole waved his hand in their direction. "This is common when I'm around. Everyone is in awe of my awesomeness."

"No, that's not true." Damien shook his head and looked at Rufus. "Don't believe ninety percent of what comes out of his trap."

"And don't let the downer get to you." Cole rolled his eyes. "Everyone knows I'm fabulous. He's jealous, so he tries to cramp my style."

"Don't worry." Jess took a huge bite of French toast. "This is normal behavior for them, unfortunately."

What are you doing? Rage's amused voice filled my head.

Nothing. I wasn't sure where he was heading. I waved him over and pointed to the seat that was open beside me. Damien knew better than to take it, and he was sitting next to Rufus across from me.

You're an amazing woman is all. Rage picked up a plate at the buffet. *Let me grab some food.*

What? You don't want to take Jess's again? I couldn't help but tease him.

No. I will never do that again. He winked at me and then started piling food onto his plate.

There was no way I could hold the giggle in.

"Uh … are you okay?" Rufus followed my gaze to Rage and nodded. "Ahh, mind linking."

"Yeah, sorry." I made myself physically turn away from staring at Rage's fine ass. "Look, I wanted to say you put up a good fight."

"Well, thanks." His cheeks turned a shade of red, and he licked his lips. "Honestly, I grossly underestimated you."

"What do you mean?" I wasn't sure how to take that.

"I thought you'd be weak." He pointed at the guys. "They always hover around. I figured they were protecting you."

"Ha." Cole barked out a laugh. "I wish. If I tried, she'd kick my ass."

"Hell yeah, she would." Jess bumped her shoulder into mine. "She's a badass."

"I wouldn't go that far." I was far from that in my opinion. More like a wolf who could skim by. "It's all due to Damien."

"No, you did the hard work." Damien grabbed his water and took a big sip. "I got to watch you grow."

"Well, others won't mess with you now." Rufus shrugged and grabbed his fork, playing with the eggs that were left on his plate. "You are a force to be reckoned with."

"That's my girl." Rage put his plate on the table beside me and sat. "But let me be clear. No one better try messing with her."

"I'm pretty sure no one will be trying that." Rufus rubbed the burn on his face. "She's making a name for herself."

"So when do you ship out?" Cole took a loud sip from his cup.

"Later today." Rufus frowned and dropped his fork on the plate. "My parents are on their way."

That was probably another blow to his already deflated ego. "Well, I'm sure they'll be glad to have you home."

"I wouldn't go that far." Rufus glanced at his watch and sighed. "Thanks for coming over and talking to me. No one else would. I need to get packed, so I better get going."

"Be safe." I didn't know what else to say in this situation.

"You too." He stood and began to walk away when he stopped and turned back my way. "Know there are more people here who want to see you fail than win. Keep your eyes open." As soon as the words left his mouth, he headed off toward the door.

"That's not new information." Cole stood and marched around the table, sitting down where Rufus had been. "Eww. The seat's warm."

"He just got up." Jess tore off a piece from her Danish and threw it at him. "What did you expect?"

“I don’t know, but this feels wrong for my butt to be feeling his butt heat.” He wrinkled his nose and scooted to the edge.

One thing was for sure, there was no telling where our conversations would go with Cole. “Well, let’s finish up before Luna gets mad.”

The doors opened from the connector that linked the cafeteria and main building together. It usually wasn’t a big deal, but Professor Shaw came bustling in, heading straight toward us.

When his eyes landed on mine, he frowned as he took in Cole, Jess, and Damien. “Mr. Jackson and Miss Wright, may I please have a conversation with you both in my office?”

It’s not like we had a choice. “Uh, sure.”

“That’s Mrs. Jackson now.” Rage corrected him as he took one last big bite, not blinking at the wizard. “And yeah, but it’ll need to be quick. We have a commitment here soon.”

“Fine, let’s go.” Professor Shaw hadn’t bothered talking to Damien.

“I’ll get your stuff.” Jess glared at Professor Shaw. “Just go on.” *We’ll meet you in the classroom.*

We weren’t sure who we could tell about our class since it was with Luna. We were erring on the side of caution. *Thank you.*

As we headed back to the connector, I was kind of confused. “Why didn’t you text us to come to your office?”

“Because I heard you were making a scene and needed to see it for myself.” That was all Professor Shaw said as he continued to his office.

He’s all talkative. Rage reached over and took my hand.

We made it the rest of the way in complete silence.

We turned down a hallway and soon he stopped at the second door on the right.

It was odd that I’d never been to his office before now. As I followed Professor Shaw into the room, it felt as if the walls were closing in on me. Isadora’s office was at least five times bigger than his. He barely had room for the desk, and two chairs were crammed into the room.

“Please, take a seat.” He stood at the door, waiting for us to get situated.

I climbed into the seat closest to the wall so Rage could have more room. Then I opened up my alpha link to the pack so we all could hear the same things.

“Okay.” Professor Shaw shut the door and took his seat in front of us. “First off, I want to say congratulations on your win last night. A lot of people had been doubting you, and you made a very good impression.”

“Uh … thanks.” This was the second time I had been told people

thought I was weak.

"So what's the catch?" Rage leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms.

"The first catch is why were you sitting with the guy you beat last night? It was such a disgrace since he was being sent home." Professor Shaw's dark eyes had an edge in them.

"Because he fought a good fight and deserved a little kindness." It almost felt as if I was in an alternate universe. How was what I did a bad thing?

"Kindness is for the weak." He raised his voice a smidge. "You're in The Elites and can't show vulnerability."

He had lost his damn mind. "How was that vulnerable?"

"I'm surprised you have to ask." Professor Shaw slammed his hand on the desk. "It shows you care, which can be used to your disadvantage."

"So she should've mocked him and made his embarrassment worse?" Rage looked relaxed as he tilted his head slightly to the right, but the tick in his jaw was his tell.

"Yes, but instead, she ate breakfast with him the next morning." Professor Shaw closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "This is an alpha school, not some human infested one where everyone gets a participation trophy."

"Noted." I wasn't sure what else I could say to that. I used to go out of my way to be pleasing and accommodating, but look where it got me. Parents that lie to me, an ex-boyfriend I wasted so many years on, and worst of all, not knowing my wolf.

"Good." He opened his eyes and dropped his hands back on the table. "Also, you need to stop hanging around with your mixed-race group too."

"Excuse me?" Here I'd only thought he had already lost his mind. Nope. I had to take it back. It was definite now.

"Do I need to reword it for it to truly sink in?" He scowled at both Rage and me. "You're in The Elites who don't like half-breeds. We stick to our own kind and only work with each other when absolutely necessary. Having friends in other races makes you vulnerable, so you need to stop it now."

"They're our roommates." Rage huffed and shook his head. "How do you propose we do that?"

"I don't know, and I don't care either." Professor Shaw's hand shook. "But you need to stop hanging out with them. I've risked too much for you two to take me down."

"How do they know about breakfast and our friends?" Maybe he would give us a clue about how many people here were part of the organization. He was upset and irrational. *Do you think we can trick*

him out of it?

Maybe. Rage kept his eyes on the professor. *But we need to be careful.*

"They haven't heard anything yet." Professor Shaw rubbed a hand down his face.

"Then why are you so upset?" Rage shrugged. "They won't know."

"Yes, I may be the only Enforcer on the campus now, but they could send others in at any time. There is someone actively trying to get into the society, and this person could tell any of our secrets." Professor Shaw stood and tapped his fingers on his pants. "If they find out any of this, we're all in trouble. Do you understand? I need you to stop now."

So we finally had our answer. Professor Shaw was the only one here, and we all reported to him now. I wanted to ask who he reported to, but I doubted he would answer. We needed to determine what to do about it.

Chapter Sixteen

As we strolled down the hall, back toward the main walkway, I felt like there was too much to deal with. The society was so egotistical that they thought they could demand who we could befriend.

The rest of the pack stood in the main hallway, waiting for us.

I can't believe it. Damien's head hung down, and he kept his eyes on the ground. *He really is part of it.*

I'd never seen him so devastated before. I wished I could hug him and tell him everything was okay, but that'd be a lie.

He dressed in all black. Cole punched him in the arm. *What did you expect?*

Batman wore black too. Jess frowned as her voice tried to keep upbeat. *He was a good guy.*

"Well, well ... What do we have here?" Isadora's regal tone made a chill run down my spine.

"We were heading to our class with Luna." We couldn't be caught off guard. We had to be strong and confident. "You need something?"

"Oh, nothing. I was hoping to have a word with you two." She pointed at Rage and me.

Of course, she did. "Why don't you guys go on, and we'll meet you there soon."

"Fine." Jess narrowed her eyes at the headmaster. "But don't be too long."

"Honestly, I should be part of this conversation." Cole wrapped his arm around Isadora's shoulders. "I mean, I did bring her here, so technically, I have dibs on going anywhere I want to go with her."

"No, no you don't." Rage shook his head and growled a little.

"Just ignore him." Cole leaned in close to his ear. "He can't stand that she's mine."

Isadora stepped out of his embrace and frowned. "Mr. Smith, you have no boundaries. Maybe you should start learning some."

"Boundaries cage you in." Cole winked at her. "And I was born a rebel."

"You were born something all right." Damien at least perked up enough to say something.

"Aw, thank you." Cole snapped his fingers. "That's probably the first compliment you've ever given me."

"It wasn't a compliment." Damien ran his fingers through his hair. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Mr. Weston, you humor him." Isadora tsked and shook her head.

“You should know better than that.”’

“Cole humors himself.” Jess patted Cole’s shoulder. “He doesn’t need Damien to encourage him.”

“See, she gets me.” Cole pouted at Isadora. “I thought we had something, but I was wrong.”

“Clearly.” Isadora turned back around and pointed at me then Rage. “You two, come on.”

Guess we don’t have a choice. It was so kind of her to decide for us.

Let’s get it over with. Rage took my hand, and we followed her down a few more hallways before turning down the one that led to her office.

Within seconds, we were inside the room. Instead of taking the usual place behind her desk, Isadora stayed planted in front of the door.

She yanked on her green blouse and cleared her throat. “There’s been a little bit of a problem.”

Her heart rate increased in speed, which concerned me.

“Okay.” Rage took a step closer to me.

“The mermaid girl.” Isadora paused, letting the words sink in. Her eyes lit up when she took in my reaction. “She’s gone missing.”

“What do you mean missing?” This didn’t make any sense to me. She said she could keep her hidden and away from the society.

Missing is when a person can’t be found. Cole deepened his voice as if he was an announcer.

How are you here? I wasn’t up for his jokes. That girl trusted me, and now we didn’t know where she was.

Sorry, I linked them in when you asked that question. Rage sighed. *Shut the hell up. Angel is missing.*

What? Jess piped in loudly.

Guys shut it down. I didn’t have time to deal with their shit.

“I had her taken to one of my contacts, and they called today to tell me she was gone.” She held up her phone and hit the speaker button. A voice I didn’t know filled the air. *Isadora, I’ve got a problem. Someone broke in while I was at the store and took Angel. I don’t know where she is. I need help.*

“We’ve been searching all day, and there was no sign of her.” Isadora put the phone back into her suit jacket pocket. “I’m sorry.”

“All day?” I glanced at my phone. “It’s ten in the morning.”

“Oh, I mean yesterday.” Her forehead wrinkled, which appeared odd. Normally she was perfectly composed. “And of course, we’re still searching today.”

Something was not adding up. “Is there any way we can help?”

“No, you don’t need to get involved.” Isadora shook her head. “I wanted to let you two know.”

“Thanks.” Rage nodded at her. “Keep us updated if you don’t mind.”

“Of course.” She smiled and patted Rage’s arm. “I’ll keep you updated.” She dropped her hand and smirked. “Oh … and Raven, your second round will be tomorrow.”

“I’m still not over you lying to me.” Rage frowned and crossed his arms. “You told me she’d be exempt.”

“You’re right.” Some of the light dimmed in her eyes. “But I can’t appear to favor one student. What kind of reputation would we get? After all, you went through them too. The reason it bothers you so much is because she’s your mate. Had she been here when you went through yours, she’d be wanting the same thing. It’s something that can’t be compromised.”

“It’s fine.” We had bigger fish to fry than me going to another fight. “I’ll be there. We have a class to get to.”

“Actually, you don’t.” Isadora forced a frown. “It appears that Luna’s time has come to an end.”

“But why?” She originally created the class because of the society. Something was up, and I didn’t like it.

“There has been some odd commotion here at the school recently. We need to stay below the radar.” Isadora opened the door and motioned for us to leave. “I’m sure you can find something useful to do in the meantime.”

That bitch is up to something. Cole once again couldn’t be quiet.

It took all I had not to grab my head. I walked past Isadora and back into the hallway. Suddenly, there was too much going on.

Let’s meet in the clearing. Rage linked everyone. *You guys go on, and we’ll be right behind you.*

Give us five minutes. Damien came out of his stupor. *We need to make sure there is at least a little time in between.*

Got it. We’ll be there soon. Tension hung in the air everywhere. “Something weird is going on.”

“Yeah, both Isadora and Professor Shaw are acting strange.” Rage glanced around and jerked his head in the direction of some students standing around, talking to one another. “Come on. Let’s get out of here.”

He didn’t have to say that twice.

WHEN WE STEPPED into the clearing, I was surprised to find Luna.

Her hair was pulled into one thick braid, which fell into her face as she leaned over to grab a leather notebook.

“Finally, they’re here.” Cole sighed and waved us over. “We’ve been waiting forever.”

“What are you doing here?” I figured we’d never see her again, so this was a pleasant surprise.

“Isadora doesn’t get to tell me who and when to teach.” Luna stood, and she forced a small smile. “I’m not done here.”

“Yeah, she just told us.” Rage scratched his nose. “And that Angel disappeared.”

“Was that the mermaid girl you told me about?” Luna picked up her bag off the ground and placed it on her shoulder.

“The one that Isadora was supposed to hide.” I hoped the girl was okay.

“We will meet here now for our classes. I fully believe you are on the same team as us.” Luna stared off into the sky. “Your energy is pure which means you have good intentions. Isadora’s started out gray, but it has darkened over time. You five may be the ones who need to fight by our side.”

“So are we talking allies?” Cole leaned back on his heels. “Because if so, we’re totally Australia or New Zealand. We love drinking, talking, and living in beautiful surroundings.” Cole grabbed his shirt with both of his pinkies and thumbs. “I mean look at me.”

“You’re a breath of fresh air.” Luna laughed. “And yes, allies as long as we are all on the same side.”

“So let’s do this.” Cole rubbed his hands together.

“Not so fast.” Luna laughed and shook her head. “We need to make sure we aren’t trailed to the clearing. I’ll bring the right stuff next time. You need to make sure you aren’t followed.”

“Why should we trust you?” Damien’s bitter tone hurt my heart.

“Because we have nothing to hide.” Luna frowned and took a step toward him. “I’m sorry that you’re hurting. Come back in two days, and we can prepare for the war that is sure to come. If you don’t feel comfortable after that, then we can part ways. But let me be clear. No outsider has ever been to our village. We keep hidden for several reasons. By inviting you, I’m taking a big step of trust.” She took a few steps back and stared directly into my eyes. “Make sure you don’t make me regret it.”

“I’M PUTTING A PIZZA IN.” Jess hollered from the kitchen. “Are you guys hungry?”

“Yeah, I am.” Damien slouched in the chair. He was still sulking after learning the truth about Professor Shaw. No one had addressed the elephant in the room.

Though Rage was the one with a much bigger problem. His dad might actually be a member of the society.

“Okay, then I’ll be putting four pizzas in the oven.” Pots and pans

banged as she searched for the pizza stone.

"Put it directly on the rack." Rage flipped the pages of the witchcraft book he held in his hand. "It cooks better that way."

"Fine." Jess slammed the cabinet door shut. "But you get to take it off the rack."

I still felt unsettled with everything that had happened today. I was surprised when Damien decided to still come over. At least he wasn't isolating himself.

"It looks like what she was saying is legit." Rage licked his thumb and flipped a few more pages. "Witches keep their covens hidden so that no one can try to overtake them. They spell it with strong magic. Her taking us there is a big deal."

"I wonder if they all run around naked." Cole hurried over to look over Rage's shoulder at the book.

"No, they won't be." Rage furrowed his brows. "Why would you say that?"

"Seriously … You've been looking at that damn book for over thirty minutes, and there isn't one naked picture in it?" Cole grabbed the book out of Rage's hand and began flipping through the pages. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"This may be hard for you to grasp," Rage said as he yanked the book back from Cole, "but I wasn't looking for naked girls. I was making sure we weren't walking into a trap."

My phone dinged, and I pulled it from my pocket.

I need your help now. Meet me at Isadora's office.

"Crap, we've gotta go." I stood and slipped my shoes back on. "Professor Shaw texted me."

"What's wrong?" Rage placed the book on the center cushion and stood.

"I don't know. Professor Shaw texted, saying to come over." I yanked the door open. "We're supposed to be going to Isadora's office."

"Why would he want us to meet him there?" Rage pursed his lips and shrugged. "I guess we'll find out when we get there."

"Don't be gone too long." Jess stepped out of the kitchen. "I've got four pizzas baking, so get back in twenty."

"You can count on me." Cole followed Rage to the door.

"What do you think you're doing?" Rage glared at him.

"Going with you all of course." Cole moved his hand in a circle. "It's a package deal."

"No. It's not." Rage pushed him in the chest. "Go sit down and be a good boy."

"I'm not the dog here." Cole stomped and pouted. "Don't make me get nasty."

“We’ll link you in.” We needed to go and didn’t have time for this. “So it’ll be as if you’re there, okay?”

“Fine.” Cole headed back to the chair. “I’ll keep Damien entertained in the meantime.”

“Please don’t.” Damien almost looked as if he was scared. “I’m good. I need to wrap my head around all this.”

“We’ll see you soon.” I hurried out the door with Rage beside me.

It took a few minutes for us to get back into the main building. When we turned down the hall to her office, we saw a man standing outside he door, looking through her doorway.

“You’ve made your bed, so now you’re going to lie in it.” The guy appeared to be in his fifties, and he was dressed in a dark black suit. “You can’t be the headmaster here any longer.”

“But that’s absurd.” Isadora’s panicked voice filled the air. “This school needs me.”

“We have evidence that you kidnapped a girl.” The man threw his arms in the air. “What more do we need?”

“I was saving her.” Isadora’s voice cut out. “How can I get punished for that?”

“The girl said you threatened her and made her live in a barn.” The guy lifted a finger in the air and pointed. “Handcuff her. We’re taking her in.”

“No, please.” Isadora’s voice broke. “I can explain.”

“We found your DNA there.” The guy shook his head and sighed. “I expected more from you. Let’s go.”

Rage grabbed my arm and pulled me back. *We gotta get out of sight. They’re heading this way.*

Against the wall, a few feet away was a bench. Rage pulled me over to it. *Sit down. We need to pretend we haven’t seen anything.*

Isadora’s high heels hit the ground hard as she began her descent through the hallway. “Can I at least get out of here with my dignity still intact?”

“No, the handcuffs keep your power at bay, so you’re staying in them.” The guy's voice got louder as he came into the main hallway. He pointed down in the opposite direction of where we were sitting. “Let’s hurry before too many people see us. Having a new headmaster will make enough of a ruckus.”

The man didn’t break his stride as he headed toward the exit.

Isadora was close behind him. She was still in her green blouse and gray suit that we’d seen her in earlier. A man stayed close behind her like he thought she might run.

As she turned to follow the man, her eyes glanced at us. They were red around the rim as if she had been crying, but when she saw us, she lifted her head high.

“Keep moving.” The guy behind her shoved her forward, and somehow she was able to catch herself before she could fall to the ground.

It seemed as if we were watching a Lifetime movie, but it was real life.

“Now do you get it?” Professor Shaw’s voice sounded from the opposite direction.

“Get what?” I turned to look at him and almost lost my breath.

He had an evil grin and watched me with contempt. “You don’t mess with The Elites.”

“Are you saying Isadora …” Rage trailed off as if he was afraid to finish the sentence.

“She didn’t respect the rules.” Professor Shaw tilted his head as he focused on me. “And you both will or a similar fate will be your own. I need you, and I’ll damn well make sure you listen.”

He needed me. Those three words hit me in the gut. “What do you mean?”

“Stop hanging out with your hodgepodge of friends, and stop allowing people to think you’re weak.” He closed the distance between us. “Or you will regret it.”

“You can’t threaten us like that.” Rage’s nostrils flared. He could come unglued at any moment.

“Actually, I can. I’ll be the new headmaster. It’ll be announced in the morning.” He narrowed his eyes and scowled. “If either of you refuses to listen to me, your friends will pay the price.”

My stomach sank as I realized what he said. I wasn’t sure how we were going to be able to find a way out of this situation.

Chapter Seventeen

Last night and this morning were chaotic, to say the least. Our group had to pretend to break up because it felt as if someone was watching our every move.

The campus was abuzz with news of the new headmaster having been announced. It was a damn shame that Professor Shaw got the role though. This was going to be bad for our mission as he'd be able to weave his propaganda throughout all the materials and class discussions.

With my fight coming up tonight, I needed some time alone. Things were beginning to become overwhelming, and I didn't know what the right answer should be. At least, when we had Isadora on our side, we knew we could get him removed. Now, it was going to be a lot more difficult. I walked the tree line of the woods outside the girls' dorm.

"I was wondering when I might catch you alone." Professor Shaw stepped from the shadows.

He always appeared out of thin air. "Oh." Shit, I didn't want to be alone with him. I tapped into the pack bond.

"I'm sure you've heard the news by now." A smirk spread across his face, and he winked at me.

Where are you? Rage's voice demanded. *You don't need to be alone with him.*

"Yeah, but you had already told us what was going to happen last night." It hadn't been twenty-four hours, and it wasn't something I'd likely forget.

"So, be careful what your next steps are." He tilted his head as he scanned my body, stopping at my face. "I am a good ally to have, and with you as part of the group, we'll become what we need to be. I dreamed of you one night, twenty years ago. It's amazing how accurate you appeared in that dream. You looked similar to now but with blood pouring from your mouth onto some workout outfit. When that moment comes true, you'll be setting my destiny in full swing." He reached out, brushing his fingers along my jawline.

I flinched back. Between that unsettling image and his touch, I wanted to run away from him, but I needed more information. "Why are you telling me this?"

"You need to understand the importance of this." He dangled the crescent moon necklace my mother had given me. "With this, I can track you anywhere. So, remember our talk the other day. Lose those friends, and be a true alpha. You and Rage will be a force to be

reckoned with."

I'm almost there. A hint of his earthy scent floated in the breeze.

"And speaking of Rage," Professor Shaw stepped farther into the light, "there he is now. Right on time."

"Stalking my wife?" He arched his eyebrow and took my hand in his. "Not sure how comfortable I am with that."

"Not stalking. That sounds too cynical." Professor Shaw pursed his lips for a moment. "How about genuinely interested? Oh, and congrats on your wedding."

"You know we fully support your cause." Rage took a step in front of me. "So what's with all the threats?"

"First off, they aren't threats." Professor Shaw placed the necklace back in his pocket. "I'm outlining my expectations. And you're correct. You have done everything I've asked for … well, other than your daily life."

"We aren't going to reproduce with them." That's what I didn't get about the whole damn thing. I was mated to another wolf. I didn't understand the issue. What was the big deal?

"Whether you like it or not, once you join the society, you represent us." He crossed his arms and shook his head. "Yes, you're mated to one another, but the fact that you have close friends across the races isn't good. What if two of them fell for each other or others model you and fall. Then, other races become involved with each other. It's a domino effect, causing all of the problems we're fighting so hard to stop."

"We've got it." Rage lifted his chin so he was looking down on the man. "Message received. We will do what is right."

"Good, that's what I wanted to hear." He made his way back toward the trees. "Oh, and Raven. Round two will be at seven tonight. Make sure you win."

Damn, more threats. I loathed that man. *We've gotta figure something out.*

Yes, we do.

"THIS IS BULL SHIT." Jess had been spewing ever since our confrontation with Professor Shaw earlier. "I can't go with my best friend to her culling. That isn't right."

"Yeah, I agree with her." Cole shook his head as he reached into the refrigerator and tossed me a bottle of water. "How does he think you could ever want to be away from this?"

"Because you can be annoying at times?" I had to give him a hard time.

"That is not true." Cole exaggerated his jaw-dropping.

“Yes … yes, it is.” Damien scrolled through his phone and frowned. “I can’t figure out who you’re fighting tonight, but I’m thinking it’s going to be a vampire.”

“Great, because that’s going to be so much fun.” I hated fighting vampires, mainly because Madison had kicked my ass the first time I fought her.

“Remember to read them.” Damien put his phone on the kitchen table. “Use your legs and think fast.”

“Uh-huh, that’s what I wanted to hear.” There wasn’t anything I could do about my chosen opponent. “It’s fine. I’ll be fine.”

“If you get hurt, I’ll be in there within two seconds.” Rage entered the den and growled. “I’m tired of you always getting threatened or hurt.”

“You know that’s a good point.” Jess slid past me and headed to the pantry. “Ever since you got here, it’s been one thing after another.”

“God, I know.” Cole came over and hugged me. “It was so boring around here without her.” He bopped me on my nose. “You’ve been the missing link my entire life.”

“So glad I could do that for you.” I pushed him gently away. “I don’t mean for it to happen.”

“Oh, I know that, girl.” Jess took a large bite out of her granola bar. “It's more of an observation than anything.”

“I love it when she talks with her mouth full.” Cole watched her in fascination. “That’s how non-vampires break their food down, which is weird. Why not drink liquid? It would be a whole lot easier.”

“There is no way in hell I could ever live on a liquid diet.” Damien wrinkled his nose. “I need meat to survive.”

“That’s true for all shifters.” Rage shrugged. “We’re made that way like you’re built to drain blood.”

“As fascinating as this conversation is, I’m going to change. It’s six-thirty so we’ll need to be heading over soon.” I wanted this night to end already. I headed to my room and shut the door behind me.

It didn’t take me long to change into my usual workout clothes. I wore my black pants and sports bra. But this time I pulled on a pink tank top. After the day I’d had, I needed a little bit of bright color in my life.

After getting situated I hurried into the bathroom and pulled my dark brown hair into a braid. When I got settled, I headed back into the den. “I guess Rage and I will go ahead. You guys come in later.”

“If Professor Shaw wasn’t a freaking lunatic, I’d say screw him.” Jess pouted and sat at the table. “It’s not cool that he wants you to break up with us.”

“Don’t worry.” I made my way over to her and wrapped my arms

around her. “It’s not going to work. We have to play this by ear until we figure it all out.”

“I know.” She sighed but finally hugged me back. “I want all this crap to be over.”

“I think that’s a sentiment we all have.” I kissed her cheek and stood back up.

“She needs more than a kiss on the cheek.” Cole nodded his head. “I can tell. She is very upset.”

“Dude, I don’t share with anyone.” Rage grabbed my hand and pulled me into his chest. “Find another girl to play out your sick fantasies.”

“No, he will not.” Jess pointed her finger at Cole. “You’re stuck with me and only me, so keep your trap shut.”

“You were part of the vision.” Cole grinned. “So that makes it okay.”

“In what fantasy world do you think that logic works?” Jess stood and placed her hands on her hips. “The one where you don’t have me in it.”

“Ha. I ain’t scared.” He put his pointer finger in his mouth and then touched his shoulder. “I’m too hot. You can’t leave me.”

“Rage and I are going to head out.” The last thing I needed to be was late.

Thank you. Rage’s voice filled my head. *I’m not sure how much more I could’ve taken of that.*

You and me both. I winked at him as he opened the door for me.

“I’m her coach, so I’m going with y’all.” Damien jumped up from his seat, grabbing the water bottle I had forgotten and left behind.

“That should be okay.” I glanced at Rage. “Don’t you think?”

“Yeah, for the fights.” Rage waved him through the door. “Come on, we need to hurry.”

All the way down in the elevator and through the front door, everything was eerily quiet between the three of us. Damien still wasn’t a hundred percent back to himself, and I didn’t want to push. After our last conversation, I was waiting until he brought it up to me.

“You doing okay man?” Rage took my hand and glanced toward the other side of me at Damien.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine.” Damien sighed and hung his head. “I never thought he’d … be like this.”

“He’s a wizard, what do you expect?” Rage’s words were so blunt it had to hit home.

“You’re right. It’s that he seemed to care about me.” Damien gnawed on his bottom lip. “Now, his mask is unveiled. I’m coming to grips with it.”

“Well, you’ll always have us.” I reached over and squeezed his

arm. “I mean, we kinda made a blood oath.”

“If I hadn’t been there, I’d swear you were being dramatic, similar to how Cole always is.” He chuckled and rolled his eyes. “But yeah, I’m good. Knowing he’s an ass hit me hard at first.”

The main building was coming into view, so we were a few minutes away from the gym. A few students were already rushing through the door, trying to claim the best seats possible for my impending doom. I got that everyone had to go through this, but damn. I was glad Rage had gotten through his culling before I got here.

We strolled into the room, and once again, there were several seats around the cage. The ones who got there early could get a front-row seat. If anyone arrived closer to the time when the actual fight took place, it was standing room only.

Directly in front of the cage’s door sat Professor Shaw. Similar to last time, we made our way over to the open seats.

“Funny watching the three of you walk in together.” His personality had flipped back to the normal facade he tried to maintain.

“Well, I’m her trainer, so it made sense.” Damien’s shoulders were a little tense, but other than that, he showed his normal demeanor.

“Very true.” Professor Shaw motioned to the open chairs around him. “Please, come join me.”

“I’m good standing.” Rage stepped up next to me, brushing his arm against mine.

Damien headed over and sat next to Professor Shaw. “Who’s fighting today?”

“It’ll be Carl.” Shaw nodded his head in the direction of a tall, athletically built guy. His eyes were the color of blood, and as they met mine, my stomach churned.

A grin filled Carl’s face as he headed over in our direction. “So this is the girl that I’ve heard so much about.” He had on a tank top that said “Beast Mode” with black workout shorts. “Don’t cry tonight when you lose. At least, you won’t be kicked out like all the first-round losers were.”

He was trying to psych me out. “Sorry, I don’t have a witty comeback. It’s just I’ve never heard of you before now.”

The guy startled before he caught himself, slipping a mask of indifference back on. “So you really are a bitch.”

A loud growl escaped both Damien and Rage.

Stop it. The last thing I needed was for both of them to come to my defense. That wouldn’t bode well for me. “Aw, you’re already losing. It must be sad to have to go sniffing around to find out things about me. You could have saved yourself the trouble and asked me

yourself."

Bravo. Cole's voice jumped into my head. *You're making me so proud.*

"If you're going to start throwing jabs, go ahead and get in the cage." Professor Shaw glanced at his watch. "It's time to start anyway."

Rage stood and wrapped his arms around me. *If you need me, don't hesitate to link me.*

As sweet as he was being, there was no way I could do that. I had to win the fight fair and square.

When I turned around to head into the cage, I was surprised by how fast the room had filled up. There was already a decent-sized crowd standing in the back.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Jess give me a small wave. Cole was next to her, and he winked in my direction.

An older guy stepped up to the cage and opened it. "Let's get started."

"Ladies first." Carl's tone was laced with a snarl.

The last thing I wanted to do was walk in with him behind me, but I'd appear weak if I hesitated. I entered the cage first, spinning around so I would immediately face him.

"Maybe you're a little smarter than I gave you credit for." He peeled off the tank top from his chest and threw it in the corner of the cage. "Now, let's get this over with."

As soon as the last word left his lips, he charged at me. This guy was determined to win.

His eyes focused on my neck, so I jerked my knee up, kicking him in the gut. He groaned as he stumbled back a few steps. "You got lucky that time."

He lowered his body and rushed me again, targeting my waist.

I didn't need to be tackled after my back injury a few days ago. I spun to the right as I raised my elbow and then nailed him in the back of his head.

"Ugh." He stumbled several steps before he straightened himself. His breathing increased, and his eyes narrowed.

Now was when he was going to try to change tactics and catch me off guard. This was when the fight was going to get dicey.

This time, he blurred as he ran toward me. From what I could tell, he wasn't lowering, but I couldn't get a read on where he was attacking. So I let my instincts take over, and I reared back and connected my fist with his face and then punched him with my other hand, going for a quick one-two attack.

There was a sickening crack as his face jerked back. The left side of his face quickly swelled, and his mouth stayed partially open.

“Ow.”

Hell, yeah. Damien sounded excited. *You broke his jaw.*

I wasn’t sure if *hell yeah* was the right sentiment. I hated being forced to fight like this, but here I was, doing it.

Carl wiggled his pointer finger, telling me to come to him.

Great, he wants me to charge. I stared him in the eyes, trying not to give him a hint of where I was coming in. If I could hurt him at least one more time and badly, these shenanigans could be over.

Not wasting any time, I approached him and went for his face once again.

He reached out, blocking my hits, and kneed me in the stomach.

My vision blurred as I stumbled back and fell flat on my ass. Pain radiated throughout my whole body.

Before I had time to take a deep breath, Carl was already next to me, kicking me in the side.

“Thought you were going to win, didn’t you?” He held his jaw as he spoke, but there was a lisp to it that hadn’t been there before.

Each time he landed a kick, it felt like I might blackout. The pain was horrible.

Get your ass up, Raven. Rage was growling his words out at this point. *Now.*

He was right. I had to get up.

As Carl moved to kick me again with his foot, I grabbed it and pushed it upward.

Since he hadn’t expected it, he lost his balance and fell backward onto his back.

Using all of the strength that I had left, I jumped to my feet and kneed him in the crotch. At this point, I didn’t care if it was a cheap shot.

His body lurched forward, and he grabbed his balls. “Ugh.”

Wanting this to end, I rushed over and got ready to kick him in the face.

He raised an arm in the air. “I’m done.”

Oh, thank God. It hurt just to breathe.

The crowd went wild as I walked toward the cage door. I wrapped my arm around my stomach and stumbled, stepping through the door.

“Raven, are you okay?” Rage’s arms circled me, and that’s all I needed to let go.

The world faded to black.

Chapter Eighteen

"I feel hungover this morning." I grabbed my cup of coffee from the Keurig. "But I didn't have any of the fun."

"You got the shit kicked out of you though." Jess pulled a chair out from the table for me to sit down. "I'm surprised you're still breathing.'

"To be honest, I tried to stop." I probably had a cracked rib, but as quickly as shifters healed, I was only sore this morning. Very sore. "I got light-headed and dizzy."

Jess giggled. "You kinda need that for your survival."

"No complaining allowed." Cole muted the television and stood. "I offered my blood to help." He joined us at the kitchen table.

"Yeah, I need my head in the game." His blood was like a miracle drug, but damn, it made me feel high. "No vampire blood high."

"You're missing out." Cole winked at me. "Let me know if you change your mind."

The main door opened, and Damien and Rage entered.

"How was training?" Cole laughed. "Did all the guys hang on your every word?"

"Hell, no." Rage huffed as he walked over to me and placed his hands on my shoulder. "They know everything. Damien and I are just stupid."

"At least we can all agree on one point." Cole smirked and winked at me. "Get it?"

"Yes, honey," Jess answered for me. "We all got your joke."

"Whew." Cole used the back of his hand to wipe his forehead. "I was worried that it would go over everyone's head."

"We have a problem." If it hadn't been for Professor Shaw reminding me yesterday, I would've forgotten. "Shaw still had my moon crescent necklace, so he's able to track where I am." There was no telling what Luna would do if we didn't show up. She might think our allegiance changed. "I can't chance going to her coven."

"I'm sure she could do something to hide you for a minute." Jess began to pace around the den. "I mean she seems strong."

"There's no telling what he'd do if he figured it out though." Rage shook his head and began massaging my shoulders. "I can't risk her."

"First off, I'm here, and I can make my own decisions." Sometimes he could be a little overbearing. "And we need to find a way to get there. She wants to keep training us for a reason."

"Well, we have part of the problem fixed." Damien grabbed something out of his pocket and held it in his fingers. He then opened

it, letting the pendant dangle from his hand.

"That's my necklace." How in the world had he gotten it?

"Dude, how did you manage this?" Cole laughed as he swaggered over to him.

"When Raven fainted." Damien frowned. "Everyone was distracted, even Professor Shaw, and I was able to grab it from his pocket."

"Are you sure he didn't notice?" Rage's fingers stilled on my shoulders. "I mean his pants are pretty tight."

"Out of all the things you could say, that was it." Jess shook her head.

"How tight are those pants?" Cole arched an eyebrow as he turned to look at Rage. "I mean are they skinny tight or regular tight? Obviously, it caught your attention, so I'm curious."

"Cole …" There was a warning in his tone.

"No. I mean, really." Cole's face broke out into a bigger grin. "Are they so tight you can see the outline of his package or the crease between his buttocks?"

In all fairness, Rage had walked into that one with eyes wide open.

"That's a very interesting question." Jess tapped her fingers to her lips. "And kind of relevant to our current conversations too."

Now Jess was egging this on. "Actually, Cole has a valid question." Maybe I could do something to throw them off their tangent.

"The chain was barely sticking out of his pocket. That's why I sat next to him on that side." Damien ran his fingers through his air. "When you passed out, he jumped out of his seat and ran over to check on you. I grabbed the loose part of the chain as he was getting up, and voila, I had it."

"Dude, that was smart." Cole stepped over and patted Damien on the back.

"He's going to come looking for it." That was inevitable. "He's going to know someone took it."

"Well, let's ask Luna about it." Rage began rubbing my shoulders again. "Maybe she can help us figure it out."

"Speaking of which, we're going to be late." I glanced at the time on my phone. "Let's head out."

WHEN WE MADE it into the clearing and found it empty, it was eerily quiet. The wind wasn't blowing.

Something feels off. I didn't know how to explain it any other way. I almost regretted bringing Nate's wolf pendant with me now. I had wanted to talk to Luna about it, but maybe it wasn't a smart idea.

"What a surprise?" The familiar tone of Professor Shaw's voice

made my skin crawl. “It’s so interesting to find the five of you all here together.” He stepped out from the line of trees where Damien used to shift into a bear and attack me. That felt like years ago now.

This isn’t good. The last time we spoke, he was a little unhinged and demanded that we break things off with the others.

Well, it’s too late to change anything now. Rage’s voice was the low raspy one he used when he got angry.

“You see. It’s an amusing story how this happened.” Cole stepped in front of the group.

Oh, dear God. Damien groaned. *Someone shut him the hell up.*

“Is it now?” Professor Shaw arched an eyebrow. “Please, go on. Tell me.”

“It started with a fart.” Cole spread his arms out and took a deep breath. “Don’t you smell it?”

“No, Mr. Smith, I don’t.” Professor Shaw shook his head and rolled his eyes.

“Take a deep breath, you’ll find it.” Cole shook his head. “The smell meandered down toward the dorms. It circled the buildings and perforated the air.”

“Perforated?” Professor Shaw’s forehead wrinkled. “Do you know what that word means?”

“Shhhh …” Cole placed his finger in front of his lips. “Don’t interrupt the story. As I was saying, it swirled and danced in the air until our senses came alive. One by one, we ran outside, wondering who dealt the horrid smell.”

“Mr. Smith …” Professor Shaw cleared his throat. “This is a serious …”

“Yes, it is serious.” Cole began to pace in front of the group. “Whoever did this must be found, and we need to press charges. I’m thinking at least two lashings if not more. We stumbled upon each other as we each individually sought out the gasser. And let’s be real.” Cole crossed his arms and pointed at him. “We all found you.”

Oh my God. Cole had lost his damn mind. If it was anyone else but Professor Shaw, I’d be cracking up.

“What?” Professor Shaw’s mouth opened and closed like a fish. “Are you accusing me of farting?”

“If the smell leads to you,” Cole said as he shrugged, “then what else are we to think?”

“What kind of fantasy world are you living in?” Professor Shaw took a step toward him and clenched his fist.

“I think someone protests just a little too much.” He reached over and touched the professor’s shoulder. “It’s okay. It’s natural. Even humans do it.”

You know, I kind of smell something now. Jess’s voice had an amused

hint to it. *Maybe he really did fart.*

Honestly, I have nothing to say here. Cole has either saved us or pissed him off further.

"This is quite ridiculous." Professor Shaw's face turned a shade of tomato red. "I'm your headmaster, and you'll treat me with respect."

"So I shouldn't have called you out." Cole moved so he had a little more distance from the Professor. "Oops, my bad. I'll know that now going forward."

"I don't know what game you're trying to play here." Professor Shaw crossed his arms and glared. "But it stops now." His eyes then landed on me. "I figured this would happen. I have a surprise for you." His eyes scanned me over and then looked at Rage. "It appears that something has gone missing. Do you by chance know where I can find it?"

And there it was. Did he know I had the pendant on me? In hindsight, we should've known he might be here. "Maybe if you told us, we'd have a better idea of what you're talking about."

"Am I a joke to you?" He stomped his foot on the ground, which made me want to laugh.

"No, of course not." Damien cleared his throat and looked him dead in the eye. "We were just …" Damien cringed. "You know, following the smell."

Rage's shoulders began to shake, but he somehow maintained a neutral face.

"Oh, I think I see a butterfly." Jess ran off into the woods. *I'm sorry, I couldn't keep a straight face.* Her giggles filled our heads.

"That's it." Professor Shaw glared at each of us. "Raven and Rage, I expect to see you tonight. I'll text you the details later. As for all of you, I believe it's time for you all to go back to your rooms … now."

"Of course." Cole punched him in the arm gently. "We've got you."

"Mr. Smith, I'm not Isadora, and your charms don't work on me." Professor Shaw lifted his chin, looking down his nose at Cole. "Remember that going forward. This is your one and only reprieve." He turned around but stopped in his tracks. "Oh, and I'm watching you … all of you."

"All good headmasters do." Cole gave him a thumbs up.

Shut up. Damien's voice was a little growly, which wasn't his norm.

It took a minute before Professor Shaw began moving his feet again.

At least he wasn't going to turn around and threaten or lecture us again. I wasn't sure how much longer I could maintain a serious face. I might have had to run off and find the butterflies with Jess.

Just like every other time, Professor Shaw disappeared into the woods. His smoky scent vanished from the air. "We've gotta head

back."

"Yeah, I don't love the whole surprise thing." Rage's jaw twitched. "It was definitely a threat."

"I think we did fine." Cole placed his hand on his chest and nodded his head at each one of us. "And your welcome."

Guys, Luna is here. Jess stepped back into the clearing from the woods with Luna on her trail.

"That man has black energy surging all around him." Luna had her bag slung over her shoulder, and her face paled.

Tell us something we don't already know. "He's now our headmaster."

"I need to tell the coven." She shook her head hard, causing her standard two braids to hit her in the face. "They'll be alarmed. Look, his energy is still close by, so you need to head back." She grabbed a piece of paper and pen from her bag and wrote something on it. She handed the piece of paper to me. "Here is my number. Text me if you need me. I'll be here as soon as I can."

Wow, I hadn't expected help. "Are you sure? I don't want you to get involved in something that isn't your fight."

"Now it is. Whether we want to admit it or not, wizards are an extension of witchcraft." She snorted and shook her head. "We're on the same team in all ways now. I've got to get back. Contact me if you need me."

"Wait." I needed to give this to her before he came back. I might not have another chance. "This was the pendant that Nate was wearing that night. It made him a huge freaking wolf. I wanted to give it to you in case you were able to glean something from it or at least take it where the Professor couldn't get it back."

Without hesitation, Luna took it from my hands. "Yes, it has his black energy all over it. I'll see what I can figure out. For now, we need to go."

"She's right." Rage took my hand, tugging me back toward the Academy. "We need to get back before he comes looking for us again."

"Thank you, Luna." There was a charge in the air that had me on edge. "I have a feeling we may be calling you sooner than we both realize."

"Don't hesitate." She paused, and her eyes widened. "Go, he's coming back."

Let's go. Now. We didn't have time to waste.

The five of us took off toward the dorms, hoping to gain distance before he found us still there, all together. We rushed so fast that we were out of the woods in minutes.

"Isn't it weird that I'd run into you here of all nights?" The fae's

voice was like nails on a chalkboard.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Rage growled and stepped in front of me.

"To be honest, I was told to come here and inform Raven of something." Her eyes glowed as if I was her prey.

"Guess who you get to fight tonight?" She leaned in my direction as if she was going to tell me a secret. "Me."

"No, that can't be true." Damien shook his head and scowled. "She fought last night. It's too soon."

"Hey, don't kill the messenger." Kim snickered and shrugged. "I've gotta go, but don't worry. This will be all over tomorrow when I kick your ass."

"Oh, you think you're so funny." Cole's cold face slipped back in place. "At least we have each other. You're a washed-up jealous has-been that is riding her coattails however you can."

"Why don't you say that to my face?" She scowled at us.

"He just did." Jess's forehead creased, and she chuckled.

My phone dinged. I grabbed it from my pocket and read the text from Professor Shaw.

Hope you enjoyed your surprise, dear. By now, she should've told you about your fight tonight. Be there at six.

Kim's not lying. I have a fight tonight. I was also surprised by the news.

"See ya." I didn't bother staying and doing whatever this was with her any longer. She clearly got a kick out of our discomfort. It made her feel as if she had power over us … over me.

"Hey." She called out, but I ignored her and kept heading to the dorms.

"You can't ignore me." She yelled louder.

Haha. Cole chuckled. *This is what we need to do from now on. She's fucking pissed.*

We breezed into the girls' dorm and entered our apartment within seconds.

I strolled in and stopped in the living room.

"How are your ribs?" Rage reached over and touched my face.

"They're still sore, but not as bad this morning." That was a true statement. They ached when I moved, but it didn't hurt to breathe any longer.

"You need to drink my blood." Cole lifted his wrist to his mouth, ready to sink in. "We can't have you not feeling one hundred percent healthy for this."

"But last time, I felt invincible." That was the way I knew how to explain it.

"He's right though." Damien sat in the chair beside me. "There's

no other choice. You need to be at one hundred percent."

"Yeah, you'll be going against Kim tonight." Jess bit her bottom lip. "She's a force to be reckoned with. You need to be at your all-time best."

"Rage, tell them." At least I could count on him.

"I'm not thrilled about it either, but they're right." Rage leaned over and kissed my cheek. "It's important for you to win."

"Traitor." At the end of the day, I knew that these four people had my best interests at heart. "Fine, but put it in a glass. I'm not sucking off you."

Cole bobbed his head back and forth. "You're the first girl to ever say that to me." He pretended to wipe a tear away from his eye. "And it hurt."

"No one better be sucking anything on you." Jess held a hand up. "Unless it's your blood and saving the life of one of these people in this room."

"Thanks for the caveat, Jess." That girl was almost as crazy as Cole. Probably explained why they worked.

"A cup coming up." Jess rushed into the kitchen and grabbed a mug. She slammed the cabinet door as she hurried back to Cole. "Here you go."

He bit into his wrist and held it over the glass. Cole's normal cotton candy smell infused the room as his blood dripped into the cup. "Bon appétit."

"You need one sip." Rage motioned for me to drink. "That's it."

The problem wasn't the taste. It tasted like the most amazing milk chocolate, and it was so sweet. I raised the glass upward, and his blood coated my lips. I opened my mouth just enough to get a tiny taste, but as always, I wanted more.

"That's enough." Rage grabbed the cup and slowly, with purpose, pulled it from my lips. "You should be healed in a few moments."

"Okay, now we need to talk strategy." Damien ran his fingers through his dark auburn hair and sighed. "What can you tell us about this Kim."

"Oh, she's a two-faced bitch that only worries about herself." Jess cringed and closed her eyes. "But of course, that's not what you're asking."

"Stuff similar to that would help if we didn't go to an academy where everyone acts that way." Damien smiled as if he was trying to be nice.

"She's an elemental." Jess sighed and took the cup from Rage's hand. "She'll be using everything she possibly can to her advantage."

"Great, that's going to be so much fun." I had never fought against someone a fae before.

“But the beauty of it is that if you can attack her, she won’t know how to defend herself.” Cole licked a little bit of his blood off his hand and plopped onto the couch. “Arrogant people can fall easily if you know their weak spot.”

“That’s very true.” Damien nodded. “You need to strike first and hard.”

I glanced at my cell phone, and the time glared back at me. It was already five-thirty. I made my way over to my hall. “I’ve gotta change real fast, and we need to get over there.”

“Shit, I can’t believe it’s this late already.” Rage frowned, and his body tensed. “We need to hustle to the gym.”

I hurried to my room and put on my usual fighting gear. As I looked into the mirror, I almost didn’t recognize myself. Something had changed inside me, but there was no time to think about that. I had to get ready to fight a girl that I was pretty sure could beat me to a pulp and possibly without lifting a finger.

Chapter Nineteen

If I had thought the place was full before, it was packed tonight. We marched in, and all of the seats had already been taken. The room was packed, shoulder to shoulder. Since Professor Shaw just saw us in the clearing, there was no need for us to split up any longer.

This is crazy. That was the only way I knew how to explain it.

Tonight is a very big moment, and the fight should be brutal. Damien's voice was low through the pack bond.

You don't have to do this. Rage's eyes revealed the storm brewing inside him. *Seriously, we can turn around and be out of here in seconds.*

I understood where Rage was coming from, but this was something I had to do. I refused to cower or turn tail. *I can't back down. I need to do this.*

There's my girl. Cole patted me on the back. *She's gonna kick some ass tonight.*

How are you feeling? Jess pushed through some people, making a way for us.

Perfectly fine. By the time I put my clothes on and pulled my hair into a braid, the soreness was gone. *And I don't have the crazy feeling like before.*

It's because you took what you needed. Nothing more. Rage shoved some guy that was in front of us.

Yeah, drinking straight from the tap makes you take more than you need. Damien glanced back at me as he pushed through the last of the people surrounding the cage.

Thankfully the crowd had to be five feet from the cage.

I guess Cole and I will split off from you guys before Professor Shaw sees us together. Jess had stayed a few feet back but still followed the walkway Rage and Damien had made for us.

At this point, I don't think it matters anymore. He had already seen us together at the clearing, and it was obvious he didn't believe Cole's story.

That's not true. Cole pouted at me. *He totally believed my story, so we shouldn't risk it.*

You think he believed that shit? Damien shook his head with his mouth partially open.

Of course, I do. Cole pointed at himself. *It was a good story, so don't throw shade.*

Cole, it was a shit story. Rage rolled his eyes but paused before going any further. *And as if this night couldn't get any worse.*

My eyes followed where he had been looking. There sat Professor

Shaw with a cocky smirk spread across his face.

That douche needs to die. Jess narrowed her eyes and clenched her hands.

He looks so damn mad sitting over there dressed in all black. Cole stepped out in front of us and waved at him.

Well, at least Cole made the decision for us. He sees us all together now. I took a deep breath and forced my legs to head in his direction.

"Good evening, Miss Wright." Professor Shaw leaned forward in his seat. "I'm so glad you could make it."

"It's Mrs. Jackson now." This guy was trying to push our buttons, and I refused to let him. "And of course, I couldn't miss this fight."

"You'll regret showing up." Kim appeared beside the wizard. "But it'll be nice taking Jess's friends down a notch."

"Aw, it's so sweet that you think you'll beat her." Cole tilted his head and chuckled.

"I, personally, am ecstatic that you'll finally get what's coming to you." Jess placed an arm around my shoulders. "It's way overdue."

"That's a lot of big talk coming from someone who won't battle me." Kim flipped her silver hair over her shoulder. It caught the light and was almost iridescent. "But taking out your friend will at least give me some satisfaction."

"What's most disheartening is that the five of them showed up together." Professor Shaw's eyes flared with anger. "But I'm not surprised. No worries, I figured it would come to this."

What the hell does that mean? Jess's arm tightened around my shoulders.

No clue. However, I didn't need to focus on this. Instead, I needed to win this fight. I hadn't ever fought a fae before. Winning this fight was going to be tricky if not impossible.

"Raven." Audrey's voice filled my ear as she touched my shoulder. "I'm so glad we made it in time."

Your mom's here? That would be a small detail that would've been nice to know before now.

Yeah, I didn't know. Rage lifted his hand in surrender. *I would've told you otherwise.*

Ha, ha. Cole cracked up. His shoulders shook. *He's trying so hard not to get in trouble.*

Warm arms wrapped around me. "I can't wait to see you fight. I remember when I was up there doing that."

"Babe, now isn't the time for this." Matthew's smile was filled with adoration. "She needs to focus on the task at hand."

"Fine, be reasonable." She leaned back and caught sight of Jonathan. "Oh, I heard congratulations are in order."

"Thanks." Professor Shaw arched an eyebrow as his eyes landed on

Matthew. “You didn’t tell me you’d be coming.”

“Didn’t think I had to get your permission.” Matthew frowned and crossed his arms. “I’m on the board after all.”

“I’m fully aware, but it would’ve been nice to have a heads-up.” Professor Shaw pointed to the cage, looking at me and Kim. “It’s time for the two of you to fight. Whoever comes out on top is the strongest of the strong.”

If there was any doubt about Matthew’s involvement with the society, it was eliminated now. There were way too many coincidences. I hoped that Rage could handle it.

At least I didn’t have to worry about Professor Shaw kicking me out of Bloodshed even though I was on his bad side.

“Break a leg, sis.” Stone stepped into view and gave me a thumbs up.

Rage spun around and growled. “Really?”

“I thought that’s what you were supposed to say. I mean … saying good luck was supposed to jinx the whole thing.” Stone scratched his head. “Sorry. Uh … win, Raven.” He lifted his hand up and shook it. “Go.”

“That’s the spirit we need.” Cole ran up beside him and clapped his hands. “Go, Raven, go. We’re your cheerleaders.”

“Please, stop.” Damien lowered his head. “We don’t need to be calling her name and distracting her.”

Kim skipped into the cage and turned around, making a show out of waiting on me.

“It’s showtime.” I headed in the direction of the cage when a hand grabbed my shoulder, and his usual cypress scent hit me.

“You have this.” Damien turned me so that I met his eyes. “This isn’t as different as you think. You’re strong. Strike first, and strike hard. She won’t be able to physically beat you.”

“It’s time, Raven.” Professor Shaw grinned and winked at me. “Unless you’re going to forfeit.”

“No, I’m going in.” Strike fast and strike hard. That needed to be my mantra. I entered the cage, and my eyes fixed on her. “I’m here.”

“Obviously.” She lifted her hand and held it out toward me. “I see you there.”

Great, I had a smart ass on my hands.

Now wasn’t the time to let her get under my skin. It was unfair that she could use her magic and I couldn’t shift, but there was nothing that could be done about that. I still had my strength and speed.

Not waiting for her to strike first, I took off running at her.

She lifted her hand, and my feet lost their grip on the ground. I fell on my ass, and it hurt like a bitch.

“Oh, sorry.” She tilted her head with a huge smirk on her face. “You must not have great balance.”

If I was on the fence about her before, I fell onto the side of hating her guts. I had to get back onto my feet and fast.

“Already back for more?” Kim arched an eyebrow and chuckled. “Then let’s go.”

I had to figure out a way to get to her. This wouldn’t turn out well for me otherwise. I moved my feet again, rushing to get her.

This time she made the wind blow harder, and it began swirling around me. Before I knew it, I was in the air and being lifted to the very top of the cage.

Cold realization shivered down my spine. She was going to drop my ass from all the way up here. I wasn’t a cat, I was a wolf, so I wasn’t going to land on my feet.

Every second, I was lifted higher and higher in the air. When I reached the top of the cage, I could feel the air beginning to still. I was screwed. I glanced up at the top and sighed. Maybe I could reach it. I stretched my hand out above me as far as I could. Right when my arm began hurting and I wasn’t able to hold it up any higher, my fingers slipped through the cage holes.

Thank the gods. The wind dropped, and soon I was suspended in the air. I dangled as the wire dug into my fingers. Damn, it hurt but not as bad as it would have if I fell, which wouldn’t be happening no matter how much she had wanted me to.

“Are you going to just hang around up there?” She stepped underneath me and looked up.

Fall on her. Rage’s voice rasped in my ear. *Play it off. She won’t expect anything. Cole, distract her.*

On it. Cole jumped to his feet and cupped his hands around his mouth. “Boo. You suck, Kim.”

“What are we? Five?” Kim huffed and rolled her eyes. “Do you honestly think that’s going to work?”

“You’re the one who’s hiding behind her power because you know you don’t have a chance to win against her in a fair fight.” Cole headed toward the cage and cupped his hands around his mouth again. “Boo.”

“Do you think you have the right to talk to me that way?” She placed her hands on her hips and snarled.

Now. Damien yelled in my head.

I swung my body back and forth so I could angle my fall and land on top of her. When my fingers began to slip, I let go.

The sensation of falling to your death isn’t fun. I was at the mercy of gravity and hoping I hit my target.

A loud cheer erupted from the crowd, which caused Kim to glance

up when I dropped from the ceiling. She fell on her back, and I landed directly on top of her. Our faces were almost touching.

"You stupid bitch!" she cried out in pain.

Before she could use something to yank me off of her, I jumped so that my knees landed in her stomach and pushed myself so I could stand.

"Ow." She rolled over to her side, pulling her knees up into the fetal position. Her ragged breathing filled the air.

I had to take her out now. It was my best chance. I rushed over and raised my foot to kick her, when she moved the air, causing me to fall on my ass once more.

"I won't let you win that easily." She began to stand as she clutched her side. When she lifted one of her hands, fire began to sprout under my feet.

My pants caught on fire. The words they ingrain in every kid came to the forefront of my head. Stop. Drop. And Roll.

"For once, I agree that you're too hot to handle." Kim cracked up laughing as if it was the funniest thing she had ever heard.

My legs throbbed, and the smell of my burnt flesh hit my nose. She was going to win this. There was no way I could win this. At this point, I wasn't sure I'd make it out alive either.

She swayed over to me with a cruel grin on her face. "Too bad you won't get to find out what your next surprise is. From what I heard, it was going to be epic. Hopefully, your parents won't be too devastated by the news."

Now. Rage's voice rang in my ears. *If you don't attack her, you're going to get hurt worse.*

"Stay back." Professor Shaw hurried to the cage. "You can't go in there."

"Like hell, I can't." Rage pushed the professor, trying to move him out of the way.

The action made Kim glance in their direction.

She was distracted. I had to end this now. I pooled all of the strength I had in my body and kicked Kim's legs out from under her.

A loud scream filled the air as she landed on her back once again. She began lifting her hands again, but I rolled on top of her and grabbed them. There was one thing I could do with my hands pinning hers, and it was going to hurt. I pulled my head back and slammed it into hers.

Her hands went limp in mine, and her eyes rolled into the back of her head. She was knocked out cold.

"Where are you going?" Matthew's strong voice echoed around the room.

My vision was fading, but I was holding on tight to my

consciousness.

Two strong arms lifted me off the ground. The familiar earthy scent filled my nose, bringing me comfort.

"You scared me." Rage's voice was raspy, and he kissed my cheek. "I thought I was going to lose you for good this time."

"Nah, I've got more fight left in me." I had to believe that was true; otherwise, I might have fallen into a deep sleep that I wasn't sure I'd come out of.

She needs more blood. Damien appeared next to us with concern reflecting in his eyes.

On it. Cole ran into the cage, already biting his wrist to make it bleed.

"No … I don't want …" Before the protest completely left my mouth, Cole dropped some on my lips.

Without thinking, I licked my lips, drinking the blood. The throbbing pain was already lessening.

Raven, you've gotten two texts. Jess had my phone since I was in the cage fighting. *One is from Luna, She said she's on her way, that something dark was encompassing the school.* Then she paused.

And the next one. Why was she stalling?

It's from Professor Shaw. Jess stopped. Not saying anything else.

My body was already feeling so much better. I glanced at Rage and nodded to the ground.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Rage kept some of my weight on his body.

"Yeah, I need to get my phone." She wasn't telling me something, and it scared me. I rushed out of the cage and approached my friend.

Her eyes were wide, and tears poured down her cheeks.

Something bad was happening. I grabbed the phone from her, and my world tilted.

I read the text over and over again.

I had hoped we would be on the same team, but it's clear that won't be happening any time soon. So here is my next surprise. It's time for this to end.

A picture was attached. It was of my mom chained to a tree with burn marks all over her face. Dad was in the background, passed out on the ground with blood pouring from his mouth.

Professor Shaw had my parents.

Chapter Twenty

I wouldn't have had a clue where he was if I didn't recognize the trees. He was at the fucking clearing. It was strange how all things led back to that place.

"Jess, text Luna and tell her to meet us in the clearing." I had to get there and fast.

"What's going on?" Matthew rushed over and glanced at the picture. "My God. Jonathan did this?"

"See, I told you he seemed unsteady." Audrey shook her head and grabbed her chest. "Ever since he got that part-time role with George in your grandfather's company."

There was no time for this conversation. Every second my parents were bleeding more. Not saying a word, I turned, heading straight toward the door.

Where do you think you're going? Rage grabbed my arm, pulling me back toward the group.

Hell, no. I yanked my hand from his grip. *I've gotta get to them.* I'd wasted all of my energy on being angry at them, and now I might not get a chance to say I was sorry.

We can't go running in there with no backup. Rage was pushed to the side as the spectators were leaving the gym now that the fight was over.

I can't leave them up there. They're hurt. I spun to leave once more, and Cole jumped in front of me.

As much as I want to rush up there too, we can't. Cole pointed at himself. *And this is me talking.*

This was absurd. The last thing I wanted to do was wait down here while he hurt them more. I needed to get there in time to save them.

Luna texted back to say she'll be there in ten minutes. Jess rushed over to us.

Let's go, but we need to be careful. Damien nodded his head at Rage.

Don't treat me like I've lost my damn mind. They were all pissing me off. *We need to go save my parents.*

"Are you all mind linking?" Stone's eyes widened and took us all in.

Not bothering to answer him, I pushed through the hordes of people.

"Listen here ..." One guy turned around to face me but stopped when he saw it was me. "Oh, congrats."

None of that shit mattered now. I should've known something would happen. Ignoring Shaw's threats was a bad idea. The wizard

was nuts.

Matthew grabbed me. Jess's voice sounded in my head. *What do I do?*

Bring them. Rage caught up to me as I made it outside. *We're heading to the clearing.*

The moon was out with a handful of clouds in the dark sky. The March night air was chilly, and my skin prickled. *There's no telling what he's doing to them.*

He won't kill them until you're at least there to watch. Cole was a few steps behind me.

If he was going for reassurance, that ship crashed and burned.

Dude, not cool. Rage growled but kept his attention on the path in front of him.

We didn't have time to fight one another. This was one big nightmare.

When we finally reached the clearing, the moon's bright light made it seem eerie.

Don't do anything stupid. Rage grabbed my arm and stepped in front of me. *Stay rational, or this won't end well.*

I hated that he was right, but I needed to hear those words. At the moment, I was likely to run in there with guns ablaze, which would probably make the situation worse. I couldn't let emotion dictate my choices. Professor Shaw had time to plan and calculate his moves whereas I didn't. *You're right.*

Rage's shoulders relaxed, and he leaned his forehead on mine. *Thank God.*

He's going to know we're here any minute. Damien pushed behind a line of trees and moved a few branches in an attempt to see through the opening.

"Raven, why don't you come out and enjoy the fun?" Professor Shaw's voice echoed all around me. "I see you brought your mixed bag of friends along."

"Why wouldn't I?" I had to buy some time.

"If you want to talk, please step into the clearing. Let's have a heart-to-heart." Professor Shaw's voice was filled with contempt. "Otherwise, your mommy may have to pay for your insolence."

I glanced at the others and motioned for them to come with me. *Let's go. Be careful. He doesn't know we're a pack yet.*

Yes, we can play that to our advantage. Cole's voice was giddy in my mind. *I've always seen stuff similar to this in movies, and here I am. Dreams do come true.*

Are you fucking serious? Damien punched him in the arm. *Her parents' lives are on the line.*

Yes, that's a technicality. Cole lifted both hands in the air. *That was*

not part of my dream. I promise, Ravey.

Normally I would find him endearing, but not today. *Cole, shut up. Seriously.* This wasn't some kind of joke.

Got it. Cole nodded and turned around. *Let's go kick some ass.*

That was more my speed. The four of us walked out together into the clearing.

"Raven, go." Mom's face had a few burn marks on her cheeks, but even more burn marks spread down her arms.

"Oh, yes." Professor Shaw rolled his eyes and stalked my mother. "Liz the martyr. The one who does right and no wrong."

"This is between you and me." Her eyes flashed to me. "Leave her out of this."

"No, you see. She's just as much a part of this as you." His gaze landed on me, and he scowled. "Your daughter was supposed to be my redemption. The one who would finally make all of my sacrifices worth it."

"What kind of wacko are you?" Cole stepped partially in front of me.

"Mr. Smith, I'm so tired of your mouth." He lifted his hand, mouthing words that I couldn't hear.

Cole flew backward and landed hard against a tree.

"Does anyone else want to add commentary?" Professor Shaw's breathing was becoming ragged as though he had run a marathon.

"There has to be a way to work this out." Even if it was to keep him talking, I had to do something.

"Believe me, I tried. If only you had taken my offer." Professor Shaw licked his lips then began pacing in front of the tree Mom was bound to. "I got that stupid class approved so I could tell you about all the horrible combinations that were possible with stupid half-breeds."

"You made that class for me?" That I wasn't expecting.

"For whatever reason, you continued to choose to hang out with all of these different races." He sighed, and his shoulders sagged. "I needed you to be afraid and played to your heart so you could believe in the mission."

"The mission to take hybrids when they aren't harmful to anyone." The whole concept was asinine.

"That's bullshit." Professor Shaw shouted at me. "They are a danger. Maybe not in the way you were led to believe, but they are, nonetheless."

"How could that be possible?" Rage appeared beside me and shook his head. "If they aren't combusting, then how are they such a danger?"

"They're more powerful than most purebreds." A vein between Professor Shaw's eyebrows stuck out. "That makes them more

dangerous."

"You don't know that, Jonathan." Mom's voice was strained, and she hung limp in defeat. "You guys never tried anything different other than hauling all those poor children away."

"Yes, and that's why you ran away from this Academy." He barked out a chuckle and wrinkled his nose in disgust. "You were too weak to do what needed to be done."

"Mom, you knew?" Why did that seem to hit me in my gut?

"This is what I wanted to shield you from." She lifted her head and stared straight at me. "This isn't something that you should have to bear. I had no clue you were already so deep in this."

"Oh, yes. Heaven forbid that I thought I was joining a society that helped these hybrids. This is where all of your secrets got you. In the middle of a freaking war you know nothing about." All I had to believe was what the society told me.

"Because you have to see what they are capable of first before you find out the truth." Professor Shaw clenched his hands into fists. "I refuse to be led by impure people."

Keep him talking. Damien appeared on my other side and nodded at me.

"Damn that hurt." Cole was behind me, but I could hear his footsteps as he made his way back to the group.

Jess, are you guys on your way? Rage's jaw twitched, but other than that, he seemed normal. *He's starting to talk, which means this will be ending soon.*

Luna just pulled up. Jess's voice was breathless. *She was already close, so we waited on her.*

"So what if they are stronger. They're supernaturals like we all are." We were all people.

"No, they aren't." Professor Shaw stumbled toward me. "But don't you see they can still be useful. Our work is so much more important …"

"Please, no." Mom's voice broke. "Tell me you aren't testing on them."

"Of course we are." Professor Shaw pointed at her. "You know the humans could wipe us out any time. We have no choice but to design our own weapons against them."

"You do realize you aren't a god." Rage shooked his head and scowled. "What gives you the right to tell us what should be done?"

There were so many questions, but we weren't going to get them all answered. Time was short, he was about to break down. "Why me?" At the end of the day, that was the one answer he could tell me that no one else would know.

"I told you that I dreamed of you. You are supposed to be the one

who decides my destiny." He glanced at the ground as if he was reliving a memory. "I had thought you were meant to be my wife, but once I learned of Rage being your true mate, I pushed that aside. Still, that doesn't mean I don't know how beautiful you are. I've seen it all in my head, all of you." His eyes scanned over my body.

Disgusting. The thought of being his wife made me sick to my stomach.

"She has a lot better taste than that." Cole waved his hand in front of his nose. "And you'd be an interracial couple which you're so against."

However, Professor Shaw wasn't fazed. "That wouldn't be a problem for us." He appeared to be lost in his own little world. "Once I figured out who the crescent moon pendant belonged to, everything clicked. You were Liz's daughter."

"Why does that matter?" He clearly had a huge grudge against her.

"Because she betrayed the society." He pointed his finger at Mom and snarled. "She disappeared, vanished. No one could trace her until you came."

"If you couldn't trace her, then how is she here?" Rage took a step closer to me. Tension began filling the air around us.

"It was easy. Her opportunist ex-boyfriend told me where I could find them." He laughed, pointing at me. "He thinks he'll be joining the school, so he sang like a canary."

How am I not surprised that he was involved? Damien sighed beside me.

"You know you can't get away with this." I needed him to focus his hatred on me. "I won't stop trying to free those half-breeds until I'm dead."

No, Ravey. Cole sounded disappointed. *You encouraged him.*

"Speaking of which, I think it's the perfect time for just that." A cruel grin spread across his face.

That's what I was saying. Cole replaced Rage by my side.

Rage jumped in front of me, and the guys had me surrounded. "You'll have to get through me first."

"With pleasure." He began moving his mouth even though I couldn't hear any words.

The ground began to quiver and shake. "Shit, it's a fucking earthquake." Maybe we had underestimated him.

A crack began to form between Rage and us. When he was about to fall into the pit, he jumped on to the same side as us.

"Well played, but you don't have much longer. Though Raven and I can still have some fun once I get rid of you boys." Professor Shaw began laughing.

Vines began to grow up my legs. I glanced at the others, and they

were going through the same thing.

"Get out of it now." Damien's hoarse voice yelled at us. "The longer they take hold, the harder time we're going to have getting out."

I needed my wolf. It was the only way I was getting out. *I'm shifting.* My wolf sprung forward, and my body began to change.

The vines that had been around my legs were loose now that I was in animal form. I ran out of the trap and jumped over the crack that had formed in the ground.

We're shifting too. Rage's voice called out as they raced after me.

"It's such a shame." Professor Shaw shook his head as he stared into my eyes. "You would've been an amazing resource for us, for me."

Rage appeared on my right a few seconds before Damien was on my left. All three of us were in our animal forms, staring the professor down.

There isn't a way I can get out of here. Cole's voice was strained as he still tried to break away.

Keep trying to get out. Damien growled as he faced his former mentor.

"I've always wondered how you got all three guys to protect you." Professor Shaw tapped his fingers on his pants leg and shrugged. "All it's done is made them a target though. And they were all so promising too."

"Raven, go." Mom's voice cracked as she shook against the tree. "I'll take care of the rest."

Yeah, running away turned out great, didn't it. She couldn't hear my words though. I shook my head no, trying to still convey the message.

The trees began to bend toward us as the professor approached us. "Hmm, I wonder … Can wolves get out of trees?"

Even though the trees didn't have any leaves, it didn't stop them from bending and capturing the paws of both Damien and Rage.

Jess, we need your ass here like pronto. Cole groaned into the bond. *These vines are beginning to cut off my oxygen.*

Great, so they aren't trying to hold him in place. Shaw's attempting to use nature to kill them.

The limbs moved upward, trapping both Damien and Rage at the very top of the trees.

"Now, it's just you and me, dear." A glimmer of hysteria shone on his face as he pulled out a dagger. Licking his lips, he made his way to me. "It's a damn shame, but once again, I'll do what needs to be done."

I growled at him and charged. As I jumped, he aimed the dagger at my heart.

“No.” Luna’s voice yelled out as she ran into the clearing.

She was too late. This was my end.

All of a sudden, a huge gust of wind hit the Professor, making him stumble backward.

Now that the dagger wasn’t aimed for my heart, I sunk my teeth into the arm that was holding it. I dug my teeth deep into his skin until I hit bone.

“Ow.” The professor cried out. “You stupid bitch.”

He kicked me off of him, but I was able to snag my teeth into the hand that still held the dagger.

Blood dripped down my mouth, but that was the least of my worries. I glanced over to find Luna and Audrey at the tree where my mother was held. Luna was chanting, and soon the chains began to loosen.

“No.” Professor Shaw snatched the dagger with his other hand, pulled loose from my grip, and ran toward them.

There was one thing I could do. I dug my paws into the ground and took a few running steps. Then I jumped, aiming for his neck.

He was so fixated on Mom escaping that he didn’t see my attack until it was too late. My teeth sunk into his neck, and I yanked my head back, breaking his neck.

I didn’t know how long I stood over him until someone’s fingers dug into my fur.

“Honey, he’s dead.” Tears were falling from Mom’s eyes as she took in everything.

What about the others? I needed to know about dad.

“They are all fine.” Cole appeared on my other side and patted my head. His sweet scent was welcome over the metallic blood. “Your dad is heading this way, and they’re still trying to get both Rage and Damien down from the tree.”

“Can you hear her?” Audrey’s mouth dropped open, glancing back and forth between us.

“I sure do.” Cole snapped his fingers and winked. “We are a pack.”

“Are you serious?” Matthew glanced back and forth between Cole and me. “How … is that possible?”

“It’s rare, but it can happen as long as they have the help of a smart and beautiful witch,” Luna yelled over to us as Rage and Damien’s animal forms finally made it back on the ground.

“Right now, let’s get you all into human form.” Matthew frowned as he took in Jonathan and my mother. “We’ll discuss everything once everyone is dressed.”

That was good with me. I didn’t want to wear my birthday suit in front of my in-laws.

"I THOUGHT I was going to lose you." Rage reached over and brushed his fingertips over my face.

"Nope, you're still stuck with me." After everything that had happened, I didn't want to be super serious or I might break down.

"We need to figure out what our next steps are." Matthew stood in the den of mine and Jess's living room. "The board will need to find a new headmaster, but what concerns me most is this society. They're going to be searching for you five."

His heartbeat is increasing. I hated to point it out, but we couldn't ignore it.

Yeah, I hear it too. Rage's shoulders tensed, and he shook his head. *I hope he's not part of the society, but he and George are awfully close.*

Then we don't need to let him know where we're going. The bright spot was that Audrey appeared clueless.

"Do you have any idea who is in the society?" Audrey turned to Mom, who sat at the kitchen table next to Dad.

"No, when I realized what they were planning, I couldn't stay here." Mom sighed and closed her eyes. "When they threatened to hurt Paul, we ran and stayed hidden until the day Raven's necklace broke. That's when she showed up on the Academy's radar."

"We need to figure out where to hide the kids." Audrey shook her head. "They aren't going to be safe for much longer."

"I have the answers you all need." Luna approached us and sat on the other side of me on the couch. "How would Bloodshed Academy like to combine with our elusive witch academy?"

"That's what we've been wanting for years." Matthew arched an eyebrow. "What's the catch?"

"My mother will be the headmaster so we can ensure that the society doesn't get their fingers back into the Academy." Luna reached over and patted my leg.

"Are you serious?" That was a solid plan and a way to prevent The Elites from getting back into the school.

"As fun as all of this is, that sounds as if it would work." Rage took my hand in his and nodded at his dad. "Do you think the board would go along with that plan?"

"Hell yeah, they would." Matthew grinned. "They'll jump at the opportunity."

"Hey, Matthew and Audrey," Mom called out to him. "I think Stone may need your help. He's getting yelled at by some college girl."

"Like we already don't have enough to deal with." Matthew sighed and looked at his wife. "We both probably need to save him and get the girl to calm down."

“Yeah.” Audrey looked out the kitchen window that overlooked the main building. “From the looks of it, we’d better hurry.”

I raised a finger to Luna and mouthed the words ‘one minute.’

The door slammed shut as both of them hurried to help their younger son.

“You finally figured it out.” Mom frowned at Rage. “I’m sorry. We were trying to protect you all from everything—all of this. I thought that by not telling you about the school, the society, all of it, it would somehow prevent you from getting sucked in. I was wrong … and I’m sorry. They always seem to find you.”

“That’s why I’m offering these five kids the opportunity to stay with my coven. We can keep them hidden from the Elites.” Luna fixed her gaze on me.

“There have to be ulterior motives for allowing them to stay with you?” Dad stood from the table and crossed his arms.

“They would help us track down the half-breeds.” Luna pointed out the window. “The society may not have their fingers in the school anymore, but they do everywhere else. I want to find them and free them all. But listen,” Luna turned around so she was facing our little pack, “I need to make sure you understand what is being asked of you. The more we dig in, the more we learn that this secret society is huge. With many players, and sadly, some of them may be people you know. It could be years before we learn enough to take them down. Are you prepared to walk away from everyone and keep your pack together?”

“I’m not so sure …” Mom shook her head no, but I cut her off.

“Either way, they won’t stop looking for us, so it’s the best of both worlds.” *Are you guys in?* I couldn’t make the decision for all of them.

“Taking down a secret society? I’m totally down, and I’ll do it in style.” Cole pumped his hand in the air.

“I’m game too.” Jess gave me a thumbs up.

“I’ll go anywhere with you.” Rage leaned over and kissed my cheek.

“And I’ll have to go to keep you all grounded.” Damien winked at me and laughed. “So it’s decided.”

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Mom tilted her head.

“Of course, I am.” This felt like my purpose. I had found my answer, to help those who didn’t have a way to defend themselves.

“Then we leave tonight.” Luna stood and headed to the door. “I’ll meet you in the parking lot.”

“Dammit, the one time I get to be with a coven, and I’m tied down to one girl.” Cole dropped his head and sighed.

“That one girl is right here.” Jess made her way over and smacked him hard.

“You never learn.” Damien shook his head and lifted both hands. “How is that possible?”

“You’d better hurry and pack.” There was a sadness in Mom’s eyes but also something that resembled pride. “We don’t want you still here when they come back. I’ll tell Audrey and Matthew that you weren’t sure where to go but had to leave quickly to at least get some distance between you and The Elites.”

That was a very good point. I stood and headed to my room to pack. This was a new chapter in my story, and The Elites were eventually going to be taken down. I was willing to put in the years and hard work to make it happen.

The End